Yesterday Upon The Stair
Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/8337607.

Rating:
Teen And Up Audiences

Archive Warning:
Graphic Depictions Of Violence

Category:
Gen

Fandom:
僕のヒーローアカデミア | Boku no Hero Academia | My Hero Academia

Relationships:
Midoriya Izuku & Yagi Toshinori | All Might, Midoriya Izuku & Todoroki Shouto, Midoriya Izuku & Uraraka Ochako, Iida Tenya & Midoriya Izuku, Sir Nighteye & Yagi Toshinori | All Might, Midoriya Izuku & Toogata Mirio

Characters:
Midoriya Izuku, Yagi Toshinori | All Might, Midoriya Inko, Shimura Nana, Bakugou Katsuki, Todoroki Shouto, Uraraka Ochako, Iida Tenya, Iida Tensei | Ingenium, Eri (My Hero Academia), Chisaki Kai | Overhaul, Sir Nighteye (My Hero Academia), Toogata Mirio

Additional Tags:
Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, BAMF Midoriya Izuku, Parental Yagi Toshinori | All Might, The Sixth Sense AU, Bakugou Katsuki Swears A Lot, Izuku Sees Dead People, Queerplatonic Relationships, Midoriya Izuku Has a Quirk, Platonic Slow Burn, platonic tododeku, Panic Attacks, past trauma, Body Horror, Character Death, Temporary Character Death, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Todoroki Enji | Endeavor's Bad Parenting, CONTENT WARNINGS CAN BE FOUND IN CHAPTER ENDNOTES

Language:
English

Series:
Part 1 of Deku Sees Dead People

Stats:
Published: 2016-10-21 Completed: 2019-10-12 Words: 424,070
Chapters: 60/60

Yesterday Upon The Stair

by PitViperOfDoom

Summary

Midoriya Izuku has always been written off as weird. As if it's not bad enough to be the quirkless weakling, he has to be the *weird* quirkless weakling on top of it.

But truthfully, the "weird" part is the only part that's accurate. He's determined not to be a weakling, and in spite of what it says on paper, he's not actually quirkless. Even before meeting All-Might and taking on the power of One For All, Izuku isn't quirkless.

Not that anyone would believe it if he told them.

(This story now has a TV Tropes page!)

Notes

Content warnings can be found in the endnotes of each chapter. Please click the link or scroll to the bottom if you want to see them before reading the chapter.

- Translation into Italiano available: Yesterday Upon The Stair by Nereisi
- Translation into Français available: Yesterday Upon The Stair (Hier en haut de l'escalier) by Mutekiam
- Translation into Русский available: Yesterday Upon The Stair by Alee_of_the_Valley
- Translation into suomi available: Yesterday Upon The Stair by Tuisku_procrastinates

Chapter 1

“Excuse me? Um, excuse me?”

It takes a while for the woman to notice him, and even longer for her to look up. She's sitting crosslegged on the park bench, curled in on herself as she rocks and weeps, and she's been sitting and rocking and weeping since Izuku first arrived ten minutes ago. He can feel a painful pressure in his throat just looking at her, and his eyes sting. He forces the feeling back. It's hard not to cry when other people are crying, and this woman's been sobbing her heart out while Izuku waited for everyone within hearing range of her to leave.

He wishes he could say he was surprised, but just three days ago a supervillain was in the area. Heroes from a local agency took him down, but not before he took a few buildings down with him. The damage still lingers.

Finally, slowly, she raises her head.

“Were you talking to me?” she asks quietly.

Izuku manages a smile. “Yes,” he says. There's nothing to be embarrassed about, not now when there's no one close enough to hear. “S-sorry to bother you. If you want me to leave-”

Her hand closes around his wrist, and Izuku manages to keep still and calm instead of startling. She can't help it, he knows she can't help it, but once in a while he still spooks. “No,” she says. “No, please don't go.”

Izuku sits beside her gingerly. “It's okay,” he says. “What's your name? I'm Midoriya.”

After a moment, she whispers, “Y-Yamamoto.”

“It's nice to meet you, Ms. Yamamoto.” She's still holding his wrist. “Did you need help with something?”

“Yes,” she chokes out, and the sob isn't just for fear and sorrow – there's *relief* in it, too.

“What is it?” Izuku asks gently, always gently. “What can I help you with?”

“I...” With her free hand, she wipes in vain at the tears coursing down her face. “I... I'm *trying*. I can't remember. Why can't I remember?”

“It's okay, Ms. Yamamoto,” he repeats. “It's okay. Nothing's going to hurt you. Just... breathe.” It's an absurd thing to tell her, but he can't think of anything else, and going through the motions of inhaling and exhaling seems to calm her anyway.

“I, um,” Ms. Yamamoto sniffles. “It was... it was something *important*.”

“Do you need to tell someone something?” Izuku asks.

“N-no, not really, I don't... I don't have anyone to tell... there's no one...”

“Okay. Do you need to find something?”

“Yes! Yes, I... um...” She pauses, and her cold grip on his wrist tightens. “Or maybe...”

“Did you lose something?” Izuku presses. “Did you... leave something somewhere?”

“Yes!” Her voice grates oddly in his ears, sending chills up his spine, but she's smiling through her tears. “Yes, yes! That was it! I left... I left...”

“Was it at home? At work? Where did you leave it?”

“Home,” Ms. Yamamoto says. “Home. Take me home.”

Izuku nods, and smiles at her in what he hopes is a reassuring way. “Tell me where.”

She takes him to an apartment building, only a few blocks away. She lives on the fifth floor, she says, and takes the elevator up and down every day. Izuku bypasses it and takes the stairs instead.

There’s no convenient spare key hiding under a doormat, which is a minor hiccup for Izuku. He knocks, just to be sure, but when no one answers, he checks over his shoulders for witnesses or security cameras. When none appear, he picks the lock and enters.

He's only just closed the door behind him when there's a faint, rhythmic jingling, accompanied by a high-pitched trill. Ms. Yamamoto lets out a sob as a small, one-eyed cat comes trotting out of the apartment's hallway, yowling over the ringing of the bell on its collar.

As Izuku watches, the cat threads its way around Ms. Yamamoto's ankles and rumbles with a loud purr. The woman's fingertips ghost over the cat's fur, barely touching it.

Izuku moves off and creeps through the empty apartment. It's not messy in any way, but it looks cluttered and lived in, and he can tell that Ms. Yamamoto never had any roommates besides her cat. There's a daily calendar on the kitchen counter, showing the page for three days ago. At the foot of the pantry is a cute little mat with the cat's food and water bowls on it. Both are empty, and Izuku winces. He fills them, after hunting and poking through pantries to find the cat food, and moments later the cat comes trotting back in and falls upon the bowls. Izuku checks the tag on her collar; the cat's name is Mika.

"I left her."

Izuku looks back at the sound of Ms. Yamamoto's voice. The woman stands at the entrance to the kitchen, hands wringing at her sides. "I left her," she repeats. "Three days ago, when that man... the building fell… I wasn't fast enough. She could've..." She flickers, like an old video. For a split second blood runs down her face and her neat clothes are ragged and scorched with dark, wet stains, and then Izuku blinks and she's normal again. "I left her."

His eyes sting, and when he blinks his vision is blurry. "It wasn't your fault," he says softly.

"She could've starved." Her eyes – or the blank white sockets where her eyes would have been, three days ago – turn to him. "She would've died, but you helped me."

Izuku forces a shaky smile. "Do you need anything else?"

"Make sure – make sure she's okay." Izuku blinks again, and then Ms. Yamamoto is beside him, stooping to stroke her cat. "Can you do that?"

"Of course."

Ms. Yamamoto smiles and stops crying. Izuku blinks one last time, and opens his eyes to an empty kitchen with a purring cat at his feet.

"I don't understand," his mother says, for at least the fifth time. Izuku sits quietly in her lap, brows knitted together in a thoughtful frown. His stomach feels tight and uncomfortable and heavy, and he's not old enough

to know what word goes with this feeling. “The X-rays-”

“The X-rays do... throw a wrench into the diagnosis,” the doctor sighs. “It's true, Izuku lacks the extra toe joint that we would normally associate with quirklessness. Statistically, his lack of a quirk is highly unusual, but-”

“The other doctors said it was practically impossible,” Mom interrupts.

“But it's time to face facts,” the doctor continues patiently. “Even if he does have a quirk, you can't register it if you don't know what it is.”

“What do you mean 'even' – he could just be a late bloomer!”

“With all due respect, Mrs. Midoriya.” The doctor's eyes are full of sympathy. “His sixth birthday has come and gone. It's long past the usual window in which a quirk would manifest.” Mom sighs deeply, and the doctor leans forward. “There is a possibility. It's rare, but some people are born with what we call 'invisible quirks'.”

“Invisible quirks?” the boy from the emergency ward echoes. He's a little older than Izuku, sitting over in the corner on the plastic chair where Mom left her purse, dripping water all over the floor. Izuku first saw him while having his height measured, and he'd introduced himself as Takada. “That sounds kind of cool.”

Izuku perks up hopefully.

“With certain people, their quirks are so obscure that they simply aren't noticeable,” the doctor explains. “Or their quirk can only be activated under an extremely specific set of circumstances. Such people can go through their entire lives without even noticing their own quirk, simply because those specific circumstances never occur, and there's no practical use for it.” The doctor shrugs apologetically. “That's the best explanation I can offer.”

Izuku's face falls. Across the room, Takada blows a raspberry. “That's lame,” he remarks. “That's almost as bad as having no quirk at all.”

Mom is quiet for a while, lips pursed. “W-what if he sees things?” she asks at length. “There have been times... I mean, he talks about people who aren't there, he'll talk to himself or stare at the wall for hours – when he was three he said something about his father tucking him in, a-and... and Hisashi died just after he was born-”

“Mrs. Midoriya,” the doctor says patiently. “I know you're worried. And I know you want the best for your son and his dreams, but... it's dangerous

to nurse false hope. Children have wild imaginations, and if you encourage them to see something in nothing, it may be harmful in the long run. If he does have an invisible quirk, then it will either show itself or it won't." He stands up, putting on a smile. "In the meantime, being functionally quirkless will in no way prevent him from living a normal and happy life. He's in excellent health, and well-behaved on top of it." The doctor ruffles Izuku's hair, but Izuku barely notices. He's too busy watching as Takada rolls his eyes, gets up from the chair, and strolls out of the room, lazily swatting the jar of tongue depressors as he passes.

The jar wobbles and tips over.

The doctor glances over his shoulder with a frown. "Odd," he mutters, and goes to turn it right-side up again. "Must be a draft in here."

Izuku stares at the jar and doesn't say a word for the rest of the doctor visit, even as Mom holds back tears, kisses him on the cheek, and takes him by the hand. He barely hears her, barely feels the gentle squeeze of her fingers as she leads him back out. He's too busy thinking, sifting through what he knows and what he thinks and what he remembers, piece by piece as it all falls together.

No one else can see his friends – he knows that much. But that's the first time one of his friends has ever done something that someone else saw.

He saw Dad, back when he was three – he knows he did, he knows he didn't dream it, because Mom remembers him telling her. But Dad was dead.

Takada was dripping wet, but the floor is dry. But Izuku saw him knock over the jar, and the doctor saw the jar fall but didn't see Takada.

Izuku glances up as they pass through the hallway of the doctor's office. The hospital ward is close by, and Izuku looks around and sees–

Among the doctors and nurses and patients, people pass by in stained hospital gowns, pale-faced and wandering. Lost. One of them wanders close to Mom, calling for her husband, and Mom doesn't even turn her head. Izuku reaches out, and his fingertips brush cold skin. The woman turns her tearstained face to him, meets his eyes, and vomits blood.

Izuku hides his face in his mother's side and cries. She doesn't see what he sees. She has no way of knowing that he's crying with fear. She thinks it's because he doesn't have a quirk, or because he has a quirk that's so useless that he might as well not have one at all.

He ought to be happy. Because he does have a quirk after all, and it's not a useless one. And when he's cried all his fears away, when they're safe at home, then he'll tell his mother that she has nothing to be sorry about after all.

He leaves the collar on when he takes Mika to the no-kill shelter he usually goes to for this. They'll call the number on the tags, do their homework, and find out that the cat's owner has passed away. She's a cute cat even with her left eye missing. She's friendly and loving, white with gray-and-orange patchwork fur, and a trilling purr. She has a good chance of being adopted, and then she'll never have to go hungry by herself again.

(He gives the woman behind the counter his cell phone number, just in case.)

The whole incident makes him late getting home, but not late enough to miss dinner. Mom is still busy in the kitchen, so Izuku parks himself in front of the TV and turns it on. The volume is as high as they dare to keep it without disturbing the neighbors. It always is; it drowns out the strange whispering in the pipes, the odd door that slams on its own, and the myriad noises that could be written off as "the house settling" if they weren't so frequent. Izuku flips the channels listlessly, until coming to rest on the one he's looking for.

A jingle of faux-ethereal music signals the end of a commercial break, accompanied by a round of applause from the studio audience as the host of the show strides out on stage. His outfit is nothing short of gawdy, a spangled silver waistcoat over a pressed white shirt and bright blue slacks. Rounding off the ensemble is a bolo tie – a *bolo tie,* for heaven's sake – with a decorative half-moon clasp. The announcer introduces the flashy host with a moniker that makes Izuku cringe with secondhand embarrassment and purge it immediately from his memory.

There's a lot of sound effects, wild gesticulations and grandiose announcements in an amplified voice that drags out every vowel. Audience members approach the stage for the chance to be on TV for fifteen minutes, and the garishly-dressed show host proceeds to exorcise demons from one, make contact with another's deceased husband, and cure another of their recurring nightmares. At one point he swoons, staggering with the "effort" of using his "quirk". One audience participant is reduced to tears when the host holds an emotional one-sided conversation with her twin sister who died as a

child.

The stage is empty but for the host and the crying woman. He's talking to thin air. He's been talking to thin air for as long as Izuku has been watching.

"I don't understand how you can watch things like this." His mother pauses at the doorway and steps in to stand right behind where Izuku is sitting. She leans on the back of the couch and sighs, shaking her head in disapproval. "Who greenlit this show, I wonder?"

"Why do you think people do this?" Izuku asks. He's not really expecting an answer, or looking for one. "Just… make up stuff like this and pass it off as real?"

His mother sighs again. "I think, maybe it's because… even in a world like ours, there are still impossible things. Or, things that everyone thinks is impossible." She drops a kiss on the top of his head. "Even if they may be wrong. And as long as there are impossible things, there will be people who want those things to be real." She snorts a little, then. "And as long as people want something, there will be others who use that want to make easy money."

"But it's not impossible," Izuku says quietly. His throat feels tight. "In the world we live in, we can't even know what impossible *is*." He waves a hand vaguely at the screen. "It's just because of stuff like this that everyone thinks it's a big joke."

He's still staring at the screen, watching the gawdy spectacle of a show, but he can feel his mother's eyes on him. He knows she worries.

"I know, Izuku," she says at length. "And of course it's not impossible – you're proof of that, aren't you? And one day… one day people will know that. I may not know much about ghosts, but if anyone can find a way, it's you." Another kiss, and Izuku manages a smile. "Thank your lucky stars you got your mother's brains. Don't worry about conmen like that. Your quirk is your own and nobody else's."

"It'd be nice if it was any good for hero work," Izuku mutters. "And even if it was, I'm still quirkless on paper, so no school's gonna want me-"

"Hey." Mom touches the side of his face gently. He looks up at her automatically, and his heart sinks a little at the pity on her face. "I'm sorry, Izuku. I know it isn't what you wanted. But you know, you don't have to be a pro hero to help people. You help people that

heroes don't even know *need* help." She smiles again. "And I think that's really cool, don't you?"

Izuku changes the channel. When he doesn't reply, his mother finally leaves the room. His hand is a fist, almost painfully tight around his pencil as he tries to turn back to his homework. In spite of Mom's encouragement, the show has left him with a gross feeling in the pit of his stomach. It really isn't fair. It's like crying wolf, only everyone else has done the crying, and now that there really is a wolf on his hands, he's at a loss for what to do with it.

Hoping to lift his mood again, Izuku turns to the news to see if he can catch any superhero reports. There's not much – at some point during the afternoon, Kamui Woods stopped a corner store holdup, but beyond that it's been a quiet day. Izuku's interest wanes, and he finally turns his attention to school assignments while the news reports drone on in the background.

He's nearly done with his math homework for the day when the reporter's voice fizzles out. At first he doesn't notice, but then the static blares, and his pencil jerks and scores a dark line on his paper. Grumbling to himself, he shoots the TV a scowl. The screen blinks black, then static. The whiteness falters and shorts out, and for a split second it looks like the picture might be coming back. Or... *a* picture, anyway. It doesn't look much like the news. It looks like a video of an empty room, but it blinks out too rapidly for Izuku to tell for sure. As he watches, the image breaks up and gives way to static once more.

"Oh dear," Mom mutters as she passes through the room again. She picks up the remote and tries to change the channel, to no avail, before handing it to Izuku. "You know, this is the third time this week."

The static gives a violent jerk. As Izuku watches, a pale hand emerges from the screen, clawlike and grasping at empty air. The hand reaches down to the floor, nails scraping for purchase, and a head comes out next. Black hair, tangled and stringy, spills from the white static, followed by shoulders, another groping hand, and finally the pale apparition claws its way out of the screen and onto the living room floor.

"Well, let me know if anything changes," Mom sighs. "Dinner's almost ready."

"Okay," Izuku says. The corpselike figure drags itself across the carpet,

face shrouded in dark hair. Izuku finishes the last math problem. His mother leaves the room.

The apparition grabs his ankle.

“I'm pretty sure that's bad for the TV,” Izuku says, twitching his foot. Her hand feels cold, even through his sock.

The noise she makes in response sounds nothing like any noise that a little girl of eight or nine ought to make, but it does sound strikingly similar to the TV static. As if to prove him wrong, the screen blinks again, and the news is back.

“TV's okay, Mom!” he calls toward the kitchen.

“Oh, good! You two play nice, now!”

The couch cushion doesn't dip when the pale ghost sits beside him, but her dark, damp hair does get in the way when she leans over to look at his homework. Izuku scoots over, positioning himself so that he has room to work and she has a better view of it. “It's pretty boring, Rei,” he says, a little apologetically. “Just math.”

More ghostly rattling. Izuku has never heard her speak for as long as he's known her, and she's almost as old a friend as Bakugou was. That's all right, though. She doesn't need to talk to make him feel less lonely.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Couple of notes before we keep going-

First off, I apologize if the pacing of this fic is somewhat disjointed. One of the dangers of this kind of AU that I'd like to avoid is simply retelling the events of the canon exactly as they happened. So, if I skip or skim over an event or scene without describing it in more detail, just assume that it happens more or less the same as it does in canon.

And secondly, the character of Rei, while sort-of-kind-of an OC, is largely inspired by the character Erma in the webcomic of the same name by Brandon Santiago. I highly recommend it if you think a cute slice-of-life strip comic that plays on horror tropes while maintaining a very lighthearted Calvin-And-Hobbes feel is your cup of tea.

Also, I made a slight change to a previous chapter, just concerning the appearance of Ms. Yamamoto's cat. It's a minor thing, not that plot-relevant.

And with that, enjoy Chapter 2!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rei follows him to school the next day.

There is nothing odd about this. She's followed him to school ever since that day in the second grade. It won't happen again, Izuku tells her, but she still follows. After years of practice, Izuku is the master of sitting still and perfectly attentive as she scampers to and fro, blowing papers off of desks to watch the students scramble to retrieve them, making the lights flicker so that some of them jump, or standing at the front of the room with the teacher and mimicking his poses and gestures. Izuku used to get in trouble for laughing, but not anymore.

Today, Izuku is silent in the midst of his rowdier classmates, smiling slightly on the outside and cracking up on the inside, as she performs the *Hare Hare Yukai* dance on Hanamura's desk three seats down, when his teacher's voice sends ice water shooting through his veins.

"Now that you mention it, didn't Midoriya want to go to Yuuei as

well?"

Izuku's been to a lot of cemeteries. The next few seconds of silence makes him remember each one.

Then all at once, the room erupts into roars of laughter. Izuku stares straight ahead, letting his classmates' scorn lash at him from all sides. Rei gets angry then, her shriek of fury piping above their voices, but Izuku faces the front of the classroom and keeps staring until a miniature explosion blossoms up from his desk and sends him tumbling back to the floor.

"Forget having a weak-ass quirk." The voice makes Izuku's limbs lock where they are. He tries to look Bakugou in the eye; he really, really tries. "You don't even *have* a fucking quirk! So where do you get off putting yourself on the same level as me?"

Looking at his face is too much, so Izuku goes back to staring straight ahead. "I'm just applying to a school," he says. "It has nothing to do with you."

"Fuck that, Deku, I know a *challenge* when I see one!" A step forward, and Izuku stares straight ahead and waits. "Are you trying to fucking die?"

"No," Izuku says. "I'm trying to get into a school. That's all. I'm just… trying. There's nothing wrong with trying."

The class jeers with derisive laughter. Rei screams and claws at his tormentor to no avail, and it's a while before order is restored again.

By the time class is over, Izuku immerses himself in the safety of online news reports. Videos, photographs, and eyewitness accounts of heroics put him at ease, and the gross, ugly feelings die down as he reminds himself of his goals.

But Rei's warning hiss brings him back to the present, and on instinct he starts grabbing his belongings. As a familiar shadow falls across his desk and his ghostly friend's hiss becomes a threatening snarl, Izuku grabs his notebook and tries to shove it into his bag. The faster he gets his things together, the easier he can escape.

The notebook is snatched out of his hands and out of his reach. Rei lunges, clawlike fingers outstretched, but she passes harmlessly through Bakugou's face and chest and arms, and not once does he bat an eye. With a shriek of frustration she sends papers flying from

nearby desks, and neither Bakugou nor any of his friends seem to notice.

“We’re not done, Deku.”

Rei’s frustration might be contagious, because Izuku feels it welling up within himself. “It’s just a *high school app*.” He makes a grab for the notebook, to no avail. Bakugou twitches it out of his reach.

“Here’s the thing, Deku. Try and get this through your tiny little quirkless brain. I’m gonna be the first and only student from this crappy school to get into Yuuei.” A palm-sized explosion rips through the notebook, and Izuku makes a noise like he’s just been punched in the stomach. “So I don’t like it when a useless nobody like you comes along and challenges that.”

He’s too close. Rei doesn’t like that very much, and he can see out of the corner of his eye what she turns into. It's hard to describe, and harder still to look at it for long without feeling his lunch creep back up his esophagus. He turns his eyes away from her and back to his classmates, and his brain immediately starts to scrub itself clean of the image, until all that sticks is dark, writhing hair and black pits where eyes should be. There's no blocking out the sounds, though. Izuku will take those sounds to the grave.

If nothing else, it puts things into perspective a little. The tightness in his chest loosens, and the power of speech returns to him. “If I’m so useless, then why do you think I’m a threat?” he asks.

“You’re *not!*” The desk takes more abuse with another explosive punch. “Don’t you ever fucking forget that! You’re not a threat to me! You’re nothing and you’ll *always* be nothing! Try and remember that next time you try to pull shit like this!”

She’s angry, so angry. Sometimes Izuku has to avert his eyes and remind himself that she can't hurt Bakugou, even if she tries. (And she has tried.)

“That’s your problem, Bakugou,” he says softly. “You always think everything is about *you*.”

He regrets that in the next second, when Bakugou’s hand closes around his shoulder.

There are a number of ways that Izuku can react to this. It is a small number, and does not include things like yelling for help, fighting

back, or trying to apologize. The reason for this is that what Izuku does first, automatically, is panic.

To be specific, the number is two. One option is to fold like wet paper, break down crying, and let “flight” take over since “fight” isn’t happening anytime soon. This option presents itself for a split second in Izuku’s mind, and what little remains of the rational part of his brain promptly vetoes it. And so, instead, Izuku lets himself freeze.

A moment after Bakugou grabs him, Izuku goes dead-still. His limbs lock in place, his hands sit as motionless fists in his lap, and he stares blankly up at Bakugou’s angry face.

(One of the fluorescent light panels in the ceiling goes out, and that’s all anyone would be able to see of what Izuku’s friend is up to right now. He can see the rest of it, and it’s still less frightening than the flesh-and-blood teenager who *won’t let go of his shoulder*.)

There’s nothing he can do to stop Bakugou from squeezing his shoulder and shouting at him, so he does nothing. He simply sits and stares and keeps his mouth tightly shut and his fists in his lap and tells himself again and again, that squeezing and shouting is all that Bakugou is going to do. He tells himself, *it won’t happen again.*

It won’t.

The anger will pass. All Izuku has to do is wait.

He doesn’t even have to wait long. Bakugou finishes saying his piece, and the ice in Izuku’s blood vanishes the moment Bakugou’s hand leaves his shoulder. Rei is still trying to hurt him. He wishes she wouldn’t.

Still, Izuku is glad she's there, because when Bakugou hurls his notebook out the window, she dives after it. There's no fixing the scorch marks from Bakugou’s quirk, but when Izuku finally makes his way on wobbly legs to the courtyard below, he finds her standing by the koi pond with his notebook on the ground by her bare feet, perfectly dry.

He's also appreciative later.

It's all in vain, but Izuku still appreciates it. They're walking together beneath an overpass, or at least he's walking and she's drifting beside him with her feet floating above the ground. Izuku steps over a manhole and walks on, unaware of his surroundings as he wrestles

with his thoughts and fears and hopes. He's not paying attention until she appears before him.

Her face twists and contorts into a sickening mask. She hovers before him, her features dripping and melting in a snarl, her hair twisting and writhing around her like snakes. But she's not staring at him – she's staring *past* him.

Following her gaze, Izuku turns just as the slime emerges from the sewer. He has time to run, but it's not enough, and the slime is upon him before he even makes it out into the open. It covers him, sticky and clinging, oozing over his mouth and nose until darkness creeps around the edges of his vision. He sees her blinking in and out of view, and his ears ring and throb with her shrieking until his skull feels as if it could split in half, but it's not enough. The thing can't see her, and she can't touch it; her clawing fingers do even less harm than Izuku's.

His quirk really is useless in a fight, some small, barely-rational part of him realizes. He helps people no one else can see, solves problems that no one else knows need fixing, but here he is, suffocating under a criminal with a fancy quirk, and there’s nothing he or any of his friends can do about it.

At times like this, like second grade, like all his middle school years spent getting beat up and shoved into lockers, he’s as good as quirkless.

The panic that clouds his thoughts is purely instinctual, born of raw survival instinct. But as Izuku suffocates slowly, his last thought as his vision goes black is that he's going to join her soon, and maybe that means he might finally learn his best friend’s real name.

Never a dull moment with this big lug, is there?

“You're getting slow,” she tells him fondly. “Time was, you'd have caught him like a rat by the tail before he even made it to the manhole cover.”

Toshi doesn’t reply. He never does.

Truthfully, Shimura Nana is a poor judge of speed these days. He could be outpacing the bullet trains, and still she'd be right at his heels without breaking a sweat. Of course, that's not fair to say; she couldn't sweat if she tried. One can't sweat without skin, or breathe without

lungs, or get tired without a body.

One can't do much of anything, really.

So she follows, and watches, and her brilliantly witty commentary falls on deaf ears.

Today, her faithful student has chased a criminal down into the sewer system. It's a petty criminal, hardly worth calling a villain, but Toshi never could ignore a cry for help. Unfortunately he's gotten a bit turned around, and there's little she can do to help or direct him.

No, all Nana can do is drift along behind him, as she's done for years, watching as he races and backtracks and finds the right path. The criminal's body is viscous sludge, and he's left tracks in his haste. Not that Nana was otherwise worried. Toshi always finds his way eventually.

The screaming makes her jump. She's been around for a while, long enough to know what's part of her new normal and what isn't. This isn't the scream of an innocent in danger; she knows it isn't, because if it were then Toshi would hear it and Toshi would haul ass straight to the source instead of loping along at the same place, following the patches of goo left by the culprit. This is the sort of scream that nails on chalkboard could only dream of matching, the kind of gut-wrenching noise that feels like screws driven into your ears, the kind that sounds like many voices in one, that shakes walls and rattles windows and becomes the soundtrack of your nightmares for weeks to come.

Not that Nana ever sleeps anymore.

But in spite of Toshi's obliviousness, he's still heading right toward it, and that means that Toshi is heading for something that he might not be ready for. And what kind of watchful ghost would she be if she stood by and let it happen?

In a blink she's ahead of him, following her ears and whatever other senses drive the dead to act. She leaves Toshi behind, and the trail of slime becomes thicker and thicker until she ascends up through a manhole and–

Oh dear God.

The slime villain is there, and he's not alone. Heaven help them all, there are *children* here. One of them is caught in his grasp, enveloped

in slime like he's drowning in a living swamp. His movements ebb and slow, getting weaker and weaker by the second as he loses consciousness. And the other…

The other is still screaming, form shifting and twisting as she howls fit to wake the dead. Only her size and the vague impression of a child-sized nightshirt clue Nana in to the fact that she's looking at a little girl and not some eldritch demon that crawled up from the depths of a fever dream. The rest of her is all writhing, twisting shadows, fingers that stretch like the shadows of branches through a dark window, wild tendrils of black hair, and a face that burns Nana's memory white.

She screams, howls, not with fear but rage, as her spider-claw fingers rake uselessly at the enveloping sludge. She's attacking the villain, not the boy; with a jolt Nana realizes that she's trying to get him *free*.

And then Toshi is there.

The fight is a blessedly short one, if it can even be called a "fight" at all. In two shakes, the villain is ensnared in a pair of soda bottles, and Toshi is gathering up the unconscious boy and carrying him out into the sunlight. The little girl is calm now, the shadows still, and Nana finds herself looking at a child of eight or nine, all pale skin and thin bones and dark, tangled hair. Her black eyes blink up at Nana, curious but not hostile the way some poltergeists can be. Nana smiles at her, and after a moment's hesitation and a glance toward the still-living boy, the little ghost smiles back.

It's an unsettling smile, to be sure, but a sincere one.

"Friend of yours?" Nana asks. The girl nods. "Ah. That's very loyal of you. Don't you ever get lonely? He'll have a long life to live, you know."

The girl wrinkles her nose with a wry smile, like she finds Nana's words funny somehow.

It's a relief when the boy awakens, and highly amusing when he goes into starstruck conniptions over meeting Toshi. Nana wishes she could sneak up and give her old student bunny-ears, something to show this poor kid that he's the biggest dweeb and there's nothing to be nervous about, but it's not like the boy could see her anyway, so she hangs back.

The girl's fingers are like ice cubes when she takes Nana's hand. She tugs at it until she has Nana's attention, and points to her stammering

friend with an eager smile.

“What?” Nana looks at him, but beyond making an adorable fool of himself in front of her student, he isn’t doing anything noteworthy.

The girl points, more urgently, but she doesn’t speak, and Nana isn’t fluent in children, much less ghost children.

“I’m sorry, I don’t – oh *hell*.” Toshi takes off then – literally, like a rocket – with the boy clinging to his leg, and it’s all Nana can do to keep from laughing herself to a second death as she follows.

“Is it possible for me to become a hero like you, even without a quirk?” the boy asks, and isn’t that a trick of a question.

Nana’s a bit distracted from it, though, seeing as how there’s only a rapidly-dissipating cloud of smoke standing between Toshi and an unwanted discovery. She wishes she could wave her arms and cause a distraction, clap her hands over the boy’s eyes, something to help Toshi hide, but it’s no use. A simple gust of wind reveals Toshi’s sickly, gaunt true form, and the boy leaves off his embarrassed rambling to make a noise not unlike a stepped-on mouse.

“Rotten luck,” Nana sighs, though she knows Toshi can’t hear her. “You might as well make a break for it before this kid plasters your sorry mug all over Instagram.”

“W-what – what’s going on – you’re not–” the boy splutters.
“C’mon, just leave already,” Nana urges. It’s like yelling at characters on a movie screen sometimes. “You’ll be back to full strength tomorrow and it’s not like anyone’s gonna *believe* him if he tells them he saw All-Might deflate like a sad muscly balloon animal.”

The kid’s face tightens, eyes twitching, with what Nana abruptly recognizes as a stifled snort of laughter. She glares at him. Is he… *laughing* at her student’s misfortune? Before she can get properly angry, he quickly schools his face into a more neutral, curious expression.

“You’re...” he says quietly, eyes wide with alarm. “Did… something happen to you?”

Toshi opens his mouth to reply and vomits blood instead.

Nana winces with sympathy, mostly for Toshi but just a little bit for

the boy, too. That must be quite a fright, seeing the Symbol of Peace cough like he's about to die. She glances at him, idly wondering which category he'll fall into. Will he be a screamer? A fainting hemophobe? Or will he be one of the responsible quick-thinkers that go for their phones and have to be talked out of calling an ambulance? Ever curious and uninvolved, Nana looks to see his reaction.

And…

There isn't one.

Wait, no, that's a blink. He's blinking at least. Of course, he did just go for an impromptu flight through the city skyline, so maybe he just has dry eyes.

"Are you okay?" the boy asks, and that's about it.

"Fine," Toshi answers tersely, wiping his mouth on his arm. "Look… I'm gonna need you to keep this to yourself, all right?"

And that's that. Toshi changes the subject and… kid just goes with it.

O… kay…

Nana steps closer as Toshi explains his condition and the boy listens. Being dead means being an observer, and being an observer means chasing whatever sparks her interest for the sake of staying sane sometimes. There's no point in ignoring curiosity; she's already been thoroughly killed, and while satisfaction might not bring her back, it will certainly keep the threat of tedium at bay.

He's sort of small, this boy. Thin, even by gawky-teen standards. He's the sort of kid that blends into the background without even trying. The only remotely unique things about him are the slight greenish sheen to his hair, and the dark circles under his eyes. There's a pallor to his face, too, which would be unsettling if it didn't make his sprinkling of freckles stand out.

But his appearance isn't what's catching Nana's attention and holding it – it's how he's taking Toshi's story. Or rather, how he *isn't* taking it.

He doesn't interrupt, beyond polite little noises and responses to show he's still listening. His face doesn't change. There's no surprise, no horror, not even revulsion when Toshi shows him the ugly, gnarled scar on his side. The boy just takes it all in with the same expression of sad, sad sympathy.

“That must have been awful,” he says quietly, when Toshi pauses. “I never realized.”

“That’s good,” Toshi says, adjusting his shirt again. “I haven’t told the public about my condition, and I don’t intend to. I’m the Symbol of Peace, after all. The hero who rescues people with a smile. I can’t succumb to evil or fear.”

“I know,” the boy murmurs, almost too quietly to be heard. “That’s, um. That’s why I want to be a hero. I want to be *that* kind of hero. Like you.” And oh, Nana wants nothing more than to put this kid in her pocket and take him home.

Toshi sighs heavily. “Look. The truth is, there’s not much behind that smile. Glory and joy don’t enter into it when it’s enough work just to stay alive and save everyone you can. I smile to distract myself from the fear, and the pressure.”

“I… see.” The boy looks thoughtful at this, brow furrowed as he takes in what Toshi’s telling him. “I kind of… know what that’s like.” He shakes his head as if clearing it. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make you – this was really stupid of me and – I won’t tell anyone, so you don’t have to worry about that.” The boy manages a nervous, apologetic smile.

“Thank you,” Toshi says, and means it. “And with this in mind, to answer your question... no. I don’t think you can be a hero without a quirk.”

The smile vanishes as if it’s been slapped off his face.

“This is the hazard of the job,” Toshi continues. “And this is what happens *with* a quirk. Without one, and without a useful one for combat, you don’t have much hope. It’s dangerous, and believe me – however cool it seems, it isn’t worth your life if you don’t have a quirk to protect yourself and others.”

This boy and his face are breaking her heart now. “Little harsh, there, Toshi,” she mutters. “And *hypocritical*, God.”

Nana remembers when this question came up, the day she tripped over a lanky kid with a surplus of heart and an unfortunate dearth of power to back it up. Why yes, a quirkless kid can become a hero, provided they gain a quirk at some point, but how rare is that? It’s not as if Nana or Toshi could hand out One For All to every hopeful who wants it badly enough.

Doesn't stop the look on this boy's face from making her want to hug him. Toshi tosses out the suggestion to take up police work like it's a consolation prize, and Nana winces because now the kid looks like he's about to cry.

"Now look what you've done," she says with a flat look at her student. "See? There – there. There's his heart breaking, that's the exact moment it shatters. You monster."

She follows him off the roof, leaving the boy with his eyes welling with tears and a little girl ghost patting him sympathetically. Well, that's that, she thinks.

Before the day is even over, Midoriya Izuku whacks a slime monster in the eye and sobs as he accepts Toshi's offer to take on One For All, and Nana has never been so pleased to be wrong.

Izuku's still in a euphoric daze as he meanders home. His legs are just barely sturdier than jelly, and his mind is an echo chamber for All-Might's words.

You can become a hero. You can become a hero. You can become a hero.

"I should've thrown my schoolbag at a supervillain months ago," he says out loud. Rei gives a rattling cackle that sends a stray cat spitting into the bushes.

It's not until he sets foot on his doorstep that the happy, disbelieving fog breaks, and a harsh unforgiving realization hits him like a sunbeam straight to the eyes.

"Oh my God. Oh my God I'm not quirkless."

She blinks owlishly at him.

"I just lied to All-Might. I just lied to his *face*." Izuku's heart sinks, and he covers his face with both hands. "I just looked the Symbol of Peace in the eye and I lied through my teeth and oh God I'm an awful person and *Mom*." The second realization is no less brutal than the first. In a split second, a glaring flaw in his half-baked plan makes itself abruptly known.

He'd said yes. Of course he'd said yes. All-Might, the Symbol of Peace, the Number-One Hero, the greatest active pro that Izuku had ever heard of, the man whose face was plastered all over his bedroom

walls, had stretched out a hand and offered to personally train him as a successor and pass a powerful quirk into his keeping. What was he supposed to do, shake his hand and say no thanks?

“Mom’s never gonna agree to this,” he whispers.

She gives him a flat look.

“I can’t just not tell her!” Izuku hisses, checking his surroundings to make sure no one can see or hear him arguing with a ghost. “I already have a quirk. She knows what that quirk is. If I suddenly start growing a new one, she’ll-”

The front door opens, and Izuku could swear he loses at least five years of his lifespan. “Izuku!” He’s pulled into a hug before he has the chance to react. “Izuku, oh my goodness, I saw the news and I was just about to call you. Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

“Mom I did a stupid thing,” slips out of Izuku’s mouth before he fully knows what he intends to do. “I did several stupid things.”

His ghost friend’s palm makes a faint smacking noise as it meets her forehead.

Mom fusses over him as they go inside, checking and double checking that he really is unhurt. Within minutes, his shoes and jacket are off and they’re sitting down to dinner. Izuku stares down at his plate, his brows knitted together. Somewhere in the walls, a disembodied voice whispers something incoherent before its owner moves on.

“Izuku?” He’s not looking at her face, but he can hear how worried Mom is. “You know, honey… whatever it is, I can’t help you if you don’t tell me what’s wrong.”

“I met All-Might today,” Izuku says.

“Oh!” his mother squeaks in surprise. “Oh my goodness, you – wow. That’s amazing! I’m so happy for you, sweetheart, but… what’s wrong, then?”

“That’s the thing, nothing’s wrong,” Izuku says, looking up at last. “Everything’s… amazing, actually, it’s just. You might not… feel the same way.”

Mom frowns. “I… don’t understand. I think it’s wonderful that you got to meet your hero.”

“He wants to train me.”

The frown vanishes, and Mom stares at him with an utterly gobsmacked look that would have been funny in any other situation. “I beg your pardon.”

“See, he – I–” Izuku stops, heart plummeting. The words stick in his throat, and before him lies a dilemma.

He has two options. Either he can lie to his mother and eventually scramble to find a way to explain to her when he suddenly gains super strength, or he can tell her the truth and betray All-Might’s confidence by revealing the secret of his quirk, and possibly his injury as well.

This choice sucks. Today is becoming less and less like a dream come true.

“Izuku?” Mom prompts. “Um. I’m going to need a little context, sweetie.”

“He told me something about himself,” Izuku says finally. “Something he doesn’t want people to know. But I can’t do this without telling you about it, and I can’t tell you about it without telling you that thing. So I’m just… stuck.”

“Oh.” Mom’s face falls. “Oh, sweetheart. That’s a tough position to be in.” She frowns, but it’s more of a thoughtful frown as she hunts for a solution. “This thing he doesn’t want people to know about. Does it put you in danger?”

“No,” Izuku says. “Not really.”

“Does it put anyone else in danger?”

“Just him,” Izuku says, remembering the twisted scar.

“Okay.” Mom nods, still looking thoughtful. “If it’s not something that’s going to hurt you, Izuku, then… I guess it’s all right if I don’t know. But *only then*, hear?” Izuku nods. “Is there a way to tell me the rest without betraying anyone’s confidence?”

“I’ll… try.”

“And if you can’t, then… I’d really rather know about it, Izuku.”

“I know, Mom. Okay.” He takes a deep breath. “All-Might’s… looking for a successor. His quirk… um.” There’s no getting around this one.

“He can pass on his quirk, Mom. He asked me if I wanted to take it.”

Mom drops her chopsticks with a clatter. She stares at him, shocked speechless.

“I… I didn’t tell him about my power,” Izuku continues. His eyes move downward to his plate again. “He thinks I’m quirkless. But he – he thinks I have what it takes to take his power.” He pauses, throat bobbing as he swallows. “Mom, I… I told him yes.”

“*Izuku!*”

“I know!” Izuku bursts out, dropping his own chopsticks. “I know, I know, it was stupid but – it’s All-Might, Mom! And it’s *me*! What did you *think* I was going to say?”

“You should have talked to me first,” Mom brings her hands to her face. From across the table, Izuku can see them shake.

“You weren’t there to talk to,” Izuku says quietly. “So I’m talking to you now. Mom, I really want to do this.”

“I know, Izuku, I know, but-”

“I don’t-” His voice catches in his throat. “I don’t think I’m gonna get another chance like this, Mom. I...” Guilt bubbles up in his throat, and he feels tears prick at his eyes, because his impossible dreams are suddenly within reach but *she might say no*. “I almost didn’t tell you, but… you know about my quirk already, and I couldn’t have hidden it from you if I suddenly got a new one, and-”

“You always tell me.” Her voice is soft, her face hidden behind her hands. Izuku can’t tell what she’s feeling, and that scares him. “No matter what, you *always tell me*, because if you don’t and you get in trouble then-”

“I know.”

“Izuku.” Slowly, her hands fall back to her lap, and Izuku finds it hard to look at her face for long. “This is – this is *life-changing*. And you’re only fourteen. I don’t know if this is a good idea. Do you – do you even know what he has planned?”

“All I know,” Izuku says, “is that All-Might wants to train me, and this is the only chance I’ve ever had to become a hero.”

“Izuku-”

“Mom.” His voice breaks. “I need to – I need to tell you what happened. Mom, it was Bakugou.” He sees her expression turn to stone. “No, I mean – he was in trouble. I was attacked first, and then the guy went after Bakugou, and…” His breath hitches. “M-mom, he was *scared*.”

The stony look in her eyes breaks.

“He was so scared, Mom. He was just as scared as I was when – and I didn’t even care that he – I didn’t even care about anything he’s done, I just – it had him, and-” Mom’s shape blurs as the tears spill over, and Izuku struggles to speak through the shaking and the tight pain in his throat. “And all I could think was, I didn’t want to see him that way. Not yet. Not *ever*. I-I don’t ever want to see him that way. So I tried to stop it, and Mom, I couldn’t do *anything*. All I could do was just – slow it down. I *threw my bookbag* and that was it. And then it went right back to hurting him a-and I couldn’t do anything else. And then All-Might showed up and – and it was just *over*.” He sniffles, wiping his tears on his sleeve. “I know I have a quirk and I know it’s special and unique but *I can’t save anyone with it*. I can’t save people’s lives. All I can do is talk to them after they’re already dead.” Arms wrap around him, warm and soft, and Izuku sobs into his mother’s sweater. “I don’t ever want to feel like that again.”

“Oh, sweetheart.” Her voice wobbles and Izuku wonders if she’s going to cry too. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry you were scared and I’m sorry you had to feel like that.” She presses a kiss to the side of his head and rubs his back gently. “You’re good, you hear me? You’re a good person and the world is lucky you’re in it.”

“I can do this,” Izuku tells her softly. “I know I can. And Mom, if I don’t take this, if I don’t try, I’m gonna regret it forever.”

“I…” Her breath hitches a little, and she lets it out in a sigh. “I… I know, sweetheart. I know. And I think…” She pulls back, fussing a little with the hair falling into his eyes. She takes another deep breath. “I think if I stop you, then… I’ll probably regret it, too.”

Izuku blinks, suddenly wide-eyed, tears drying on his face. “You mean…”

“I want you to be safe,” she says. “I want so badly for you to be safe. But I want you to be happy more.” Gently, Mom cups the side of his face in her hand. “Will this make you happy?”

“More than anything,” Izuku whispers.

“Well.” After a moment, she offers a brave little smile, and somehow it seems even brighter than All-Might’s. “All right then. Tell me what I can do to help.”

Rei shrieks in triumph, taking out the kitchen light and sending a metal spatula flying across the room.

Chapter End Notes

CW: Bullying

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

> Edit 12/26/17: By popular demand and my own personal desire, I have made a minor aesthetic modification to Izuku in this story; this chapter has been edited to include it.
>
> CW: Gore, discussions of past domestic abuse, car accidents, and murder.

Self-imposed community service is surprisingly difficult with all the screaming.

Izuku's not the one screaming – well, he does yell a little, like when he barks his shin on the corner of a discarded oven or accidentally drops a microwave oven on his foot. But he's not getting distracted by the sound of his own voice.

The first time it happens is on the very first day, and Izuku is so exhausted from waking up at the crack of dawn that he's sure he's just having a vivid auditory hallucination.

But no, that's not the case, because the sound of it sends Rei spider-crawling down from her perch on the trash heap, and it makes the ghost woman at All-Might's side hover closer and look around in alarm. With the woman's back turned, Rei tugs on his hand and points. He follows the direction of her finger, bleary-eyed, but all he sees are rolling hills of garbage.

Rolling, screaming hills of garbage.

He's already tired and sore from the heavy lifting he's done since he got started, but now there's a buzzing in his nerves. It's not fear, not yet, but it's a quietly relentless, anxious energy. It's a lot like fight or flight, but he can't yet tell whether he wants to fight or flee more; all he knows is he doesn't want to stay still. He wants to do *something*, anything to make the screaming stop.

Before he can stop himself, he groans aloud and massages desperately at his forehead, trying to ward off an oncoming headache.

A hearty pat on the back almost knocks him flat on his face, and his unbalanced staggering hides the fact that it makes him jump like a

startled rabbit. “Resting already?” All-Might’s voice booms, momentarily drowning out the disembodied shrieking. “Not giving up so soon, are we, young Midoriya?”

“Nope!” Izuku puts on his brightest, most determined smile, and gets back to hauling trash to the pickup. It doesn’t take much to get him out of breath, but he carries on. As he does so, he tilts his head this way and that, trying to pinpoint where the cries are coming from. His friend keeps close to him, glaring around all the while.

Before long, Izuku determines that the voice isn’t just screaming; it’s crying, as well. His nervousness drops a little, but the buzz of restless energy is still there. Izuku pours it into what he’s doing.

“I don’t like this.”

Izuku shoots a quick glance toward the speaker. Ever since the sludge villain incident, he’s seen her hanging close to All-Might’s side. He has yet to see one without the other.

She’s not someone he recognizes, and that only piques his curiosity. She’s broad and muscular, with dark hair in a half-updo. A lot of ghosts appear in whatever outfit they died in, but most of them can change how they look if they want, and Izuku’s never sure either way unless there’s blood or clothing damage. In this ghost’s case, her tank top and athletic pants make her look like she died on her way to the gym. There doesn’t seem to be a mark on her, though, so she was either poisoned or she’s changed her look.

Izuku wonders what her name is.

He hasn’t spoken to her – not yet. He hasn’t seen her without All-Might around, and there’s no way he’s going to risk talking to her when the Number One Hero might hear him. If All-Might hears him, then he’ll ask who he’s talking to, and Izuku can’t tell him the truth. He absolutely can’t.

Izuku has his chance, his first and only chance to become a hero. There’s no way he’s risking it when he’s barely even started. All-Might doesn’t have to know.

As he watches from the corner of his eye, the woman aims a swat at the back of All-Might’s head that goes right through him. “Welp, I’m gonna go check that mess out and, uh… hopefully figure out a way to clue you two knuckleheads in on a screaming rageghost if I need to. Sit tight, Toshi.” She vanishes then into thin air.

Izuku purses his lips as he stoops and wraps his arms around what looks like the remains of a microwave oven. If it does prove to be dangerous, then he'll have to find a way to warn All-Might without revealing too much. Can he make up some excuse for them to leave, without making All-Might think he isn't serious about this?

Before he can think further on the subject, the haunting voice is joined by a second, and that's when the eerie wails turn into what sounds like the ghostly-shrieking equivalent of the noises cats make when they fight in an alleyway. Izuku certainly isn't expecting it, because that's when he drops the microwave oven on his own foot and adds his own high-pitched yelp to the din.

Thanks to disuse and decay, it's only about half a microwave oven by now, so Izuku avoids a broken foot. He can't quite dodge All-Might's attention, though.

"Haha, w-whoops!" Gingerly he pulls his foot out from under the broken appliance. "Silly me, b-butterfingers, haha. No harm done, don't worry about it, I can just. Pick it back up." He does so, still chunnering to himself with the faint hope that All-Might will brush this off. "Yup, still going. No problem. Off to the truck." Except there's a very good chance that All-Might's ghost friend is tangling with an unhappy poltergeist at the moment, and Izuku has no way of escaping his attention long enough to defuse the situation.

He loads the broken microwave oven and almost bumps into Rei. Her hair is beginning to stir, without any help from the wind, and that's usually a good sign that she's uneasy, too. Izuku chews his lip and dawdles over choosing the next piece of trash to grab. The woman must be someone All-Might knows. She doesn't look enough like him to be a relative – maybe a friend? A girlfriend? Did All-Might ever even have a girlfriend? He certainly has a lot of female fans – he's getting off track. The point is, if she's spending her afterlife following him around, then there was some kind of bond. There had to be. Rei's different; if it weren't for the fact that he could see her and hear her and talk to her, Izuku doubts she would have given him a second thought. But if this woman is important to All-Might…

Well, sitting by while she gets in trouble with a poltergeist doesn't sit right with Izuku.

He can't risk talking to Rei with All-Might so close, so he stalls a few more seconds to leave his hands free.

“Go check on her?” he signs, turning away from All-Might to hide the movements of his hands. “Make sure she’s okay.” His friend vanishes, and Izuku scoops up an old tire, slings it over his shoulder, and jogs back to the pickup.

The two-toned shrieking is cut off by a blood-curdling screech that churns Izuku’s stomach until he has to pause to let the nausea pass, and for a few glorious seconds, silence falls. Izuku waits on bated breath, before finally the original voice takes up its haunting wail once more.

Rei materializes close by, and a few seconds later Izuku lets out a soft sigh of relief as the dark-haired woman returns to All-Might’s side. She looks a little ragged and faded around the edges, but she seems all right.
“Shit,” he hears her hiss. “*Shit*. I’ve gotten weak too, Toshi. Time was, I could’ve ended a fight like that with my pinky finger. Now I need little monster girls coming to my rescue – no offense, sweetie, thanks for that. *Ow*. Okay. Just gotta… stay away from that sedan. For the love of God, Toshi, *stay away from that sedan*.”

Izuku tosses a glance over his shoulder, frowns a little, and spots the car in question. It’s just as battered and disused as everything else in this shoreline junkyard, bent and warped out of shape, most of its windows smashed, and it’s in the direction that the wailing is coming from. It’s also just within the area All-Might set him to clean, but well out of his reach for now. At this point he’d need climbing gear just to get to it through all the rest of the trash.

The wailing breaks into a sob, just for a moment.

Izuku sets his jaw and steps in the direction of the old sedan. There’s plenty of junk in the way, but he’ll get there. He has to; poltergeist or not, there’s someone who might need help, and he’s not going to consider this job done unless he cleans that up, too.

He sets his shoulder against a broken-down washing machine, digs his heels into the sand, and keeps working.

It takes two and a half weeks for him to reach the sedan. If All-Might notices that he’s moving in a specific direction, he says nothing and Izuku offers neither acknowledgment nor explanation. The woman notices, though – the woman who follows All-Might. She was always nervous, what with the continuous screaming echoing through the trash pile, but a few days before Izuku reaches the car, she realizes

that he's headed straight in that direction.

She tries to stop him. For the better part of that day, Izuku works through her warning shouts on top of the screaming. He tries to signal her when All-Might's back is turned, but she never notices. And she won't try to stop him physically, because Rei growls when she gets too close.

(He thinks about taking the risk anyway. All-Might is in his skeletal true form more often than not – is he more or less observant when he isn't using his quirk?)

It comes to a head the day Izuku finally clears the path. He manages to haul away three bicycles that got warped and tangled together, and that turns out to be something of a keystone in clearing the way to the sedan. After Izuku wrestles the mess into the back of the pickup, he runs back to continue. All-Might watches and waits, gaunt enough to be drowning in the jacket he's wearing.

The path that Izuku has cleared cuts between two larger piles like a narrow valley of garbage. At the top of the pile on the right, there's a television set balanced somewhat precariously. It looks stable enough to most, but most don't take into account the outbursts of anxious ghosts.

"One step at a time, young Midoriya," All-Might is saying as Izuku comes jogging back. "At your stage, I doubt you'll be able to move that." He nods to the broken-down sedan. "Unless, of course, you'd like to try."

"I'll get to it," Izuku says, and resists the urge to rub at his ears. The screaming is almost close enough to hurt at this point.

"No, you *won't*." The ghost who follows All-Might sounds all the more agitated. She blinks in and out of view, ending up perched at the top of the pile on the right. Izuku shoots her a look, but she's too upset to notice. "Stay away from there! Both of you! Toshi, I *mean* it!" Izuku's friend hisses back at her, and the woman's form flickers. "Can't we *warn* them?" she yells back. The force of her frustration rattles Izuku, and she bumps against the television set.

All-Might takes a step closer to the pile. Izuku doesn't even think about it. His hand shoots out, blocking All-Might from taking a step further. At that moment, the television teeters over, falls, and hits the sand just a few feet in front of them.

"*Shit-*" Izuku hears the ghost woman hiss, before Rei spider-crawls up the pile to shriek her fury right in the woman's face.

Wordlessly he crouches, lifts up the television, and staggers back to the pickup beneath its weight, while the woman's frantic apologies mingle with his friend's furious shrieks and growls.

All-Might surprises him by ruffling his hair when he gets back, and Izuku steers the cleanup away from the sedan once more.

It's only that night that he dares approach it again. Once he's eaten and finished his homework, his studying, and daily scheduled exercises, Izuku makes his way back to the beach. All-Might and his protective tagalong are nowhere to be seen. Izuku is alone except for Rei, and free to do whatever he needs.

"Stay back," he tells her. She scowls at him, and he glares back. "Stay *back*. I just need to talk to them."

Sand crunches beneath his shoes as he meanders his way through the garbage. The poltergeist still screams and cries, louder and louder as Izuku creeps through the path he made and approaches the broken sedan. His pace slows until he's inching forward. Step, then pause. Step, then pause. Step, then pause. Finally, Izuku can reach out and brush the bent door with his fingertips.

A pale hand, bloodied and missing two fingers, thrusts out the window, seizes him by the wrist, and *yanks*. Izuku catches the edge of the door, and that's all that keeps him from getting dragged through the broken window. He's still pulled to the opening, and finds himself almost nose to nose with the wailing ghost.

Her face is battered beyond recognition, her skull caved in and misshapen. Shards from the broken windshield protrude from her throat, and her scream bubbles wetly. Her other hand, mangled and half gone, grasps uselessly at his throat.

Terror rushes him, and for a split second Izuku drowns in it. It fills his chest and moves outward, buzzing just beneath his skin, filling his head like cotton.

Izuku breathes in, breathes out, and continues to do so as he waits for the fear to ebb and recede. Dimly he can still hear the waves lapping at the beach, and he focuses on that sound. The terror washes over him the way the waves wash over the sand, and roils in his stomach for a few seconds before it finally filters out again, leaving him shaky

but clear-headed.

(His friend is staying back, technically, but he feels her clutching at his jacket sleeve and hears her soft, high-pitched warning snarl.)

He coughs, swallows the lump in his throat, and shifts his weight in the sand. “Good evening. My name’s Midoriya. What’s yours?”

“*I lost it!*” His ears burn when she wails so close to them. “*I lost it, I just lost it! I need to find it before it’s too late!*”

“I’m sorry,” Izuku answers. “What did you lose?”

“*He’ll cut the brakes.*” The poltergeist sobs as blood trickles from her eyes and nose and spills freely from her mouth. “*I lost the ring, and he doesn’t believe me. I was just hiding – here. I hid here. He wouldn’t look for me here. He called me trash so I hid with the garbage. And I lost it!*”

“A ring? Here, at this beach?”

“*He thought I threw it away. He thought I was leaving him.*” She leaves his throat alone and paws desperately at the front of his jacket. “*I was driving here. To this beach. To look for it – it’s here. It’s somewhere. I have to find it – if I don’t find it he’ll think I’m leaving him and he said he’d cut the brakes if I tried to leave!*”

“I’ll help you,” Izuku says. “I’ll help, I promise. I’m cleaning up the beach. I’ll look for it, and if I find it, I’ll bring it to you.”

“*Tell him I’ll look for it,*” the ghost pleads. “*Tell him. Tell him he doesn’t need to cut the brakes.*”

“I’ll help you,” Izuku repeats, though it feels as if his throat is closing. “It’s going to be all right. I’ll help you.”

The hands on his jacket and wrist vanish. The woman vanishes. Izuku finds himself leaning against the broken sedan, staring through the smashed-in window of an empty car.

Stinging pain in his hand makes itself known. In catching himself on the door, he’d cut his palm on one of the shards left by the window. On his other hand, finger-shaped bruises encircle his wrist.

Before going to bed that night, Izuku does a quick internet search. He finds a news story from just a few months before: after a year-long trial, one Takeshi Matsumoto was convicted of murdering his fiancee

by sabotaging her car. Izuku recognizes the car and its trapped driver in the photos, shuts off the computer, and sleeps about as well as you'd expect.

The poltergeist is quieter after that. That's a good thing, because that means All-Might's ghost friend is less nervous, Rei is less snappish, television sets are less likely to fall on anyone, and Izuku can focus better on the task at hand.

Or rather, the tasks.

It's entirely possible (highly improbable) that he's stumbled across the ring and thrown it away by accident already. But until he's cleaned up this beach, he has no way of knowing. Which means that, rather than clearing just a section of the horizon like All-Might told him to, he might have to clear the entire damn thing instead.

Oh, well. He was sort of banking on that anyway. This is just extra motivation.

The only real difference it makes is that now he goes out to the beach at night as well, and helps the murdered ghost search the garbage pile for her lost ring. It always leaves him exhausted the next day, and All-Might notices.

"You're not following the plan, are you?" All-Might chides him when he collapses in the middle of a run. "Overdoing it is just as bad as not working at all, you know. If you exhaust yourself, you'll only move backwards."

"Gotta keep going," Izuku wheezes.

"Within *reason*, kid."

Izuku grinds his teeth. It's not like he can explain why he's working himself so hard.

"It's good to push your limits," All-Might continues. "That's the entire point of this training in the first place. But you have to *know* those limits, so we can adjust your abilities in time for the exam."

"Not about the exam." Izuku tries to pick himself back up, he really does. "My – I'm not – I just have to be stronger. So I can-" *save people, save as many people as I can, stop murderers so people don't have to worry about cut brake lines and lost rings, stop supervillains so that people can go*

home and feed their pets instead of dying in hospitals, make a world where there are less ghosts for me to talk to-

He says none of that. What he does say is, “I have to be stronger. As strong as the strongest hero.” He raises his head and meets All-Might’s eyes, willing him to understand, but not understand too much.

A moment later, All-Might is activating his quirk and scooping him right off the ground like a tired cat. “You really are obsessive!” There’s laughter in his voice. “But I can’t say I don’t approve. Still! Impatience with your training won’t help anyone, least of all you. Not to worry, though – this old man will revise the plan for you.”

“Toshi, don’t give me that shit!” the ghost woman yells. “Old my ass!”

In spite of everything, Izuku laughs so hard he almost pukes.

Bit by bit, the beach horizon clears. Trash and junk and litter give way to the white sand beneath, and for every heavy bag of garbage and broken appliance Izuku hauls away, the next gets lighter. He can barely remember how it feels to wake up in the morning without sore muscles, but it gets easier.

The shelter rings him up one day, tells him Ms. Yamamoto’s one-eyed cat hasn’t been adopted yet and may have to be transferred to a different shelter to free up space. Izuku tells his mother, and that night he falls asleep with Mika purring on his chest.

He gives the broken sedan a wide berth during the day. Izuku still hears the poltergeist cry from time to time. She never leaves the car, not during the day and not when Izuku comes at night, even when he talks to her and tries to coax her out. Maybe she can’t come out.

After a while, Izuku stops trying. He won’t risk getting close again, and beyond that there’s only one way he knows how to help her. So he trains, studies, cleans up the beach, and searches every day for the ring. When he’s not doing any of these things, he tries to sleep.

The entrance exam creeps closer. The garbage on the beach dwindles. No rings turn up.

He cleans the beach. He works during the day with All-Might’s supervision, and under the cover of darkness with his best friend, and only the moon and a flashlight to light their search. He cleans far more than All-Might asked of him, clearing the white sand and the

horizon.

The entrance exam is a week away by the time Izuku can sling a broken bicycle over one shoulder and tuck a broken air conditioner under his free arm and jog both of them from the beach to the pickup at an easy pace. The ghost in the car wails and weeps day and night. Izuku thinks of her when he's studying, when he's jogging, when he's strengthening his grip under the table, and when he's lying awake at night, petting his new cat and waiting for sleep to take him.

At six in the morning, on the day of the entrance exam, Izuku stands on clear white sand and drowns out her cries by screaming his frustration at the sunrise, because he hasn't found a damn ring.

It sticks with him in the back of his mind, persistent as a mosquito in the room. He's almost glad for the excuse to punch a giant robot in the face(?) because at least that gives him a period of blessed distraction. Even if it does more or less destroy his arm and legs in the process. He comes out of Recovery Girl's presence half-certain that he's blown it all, six months of hard work down the drain, and for the first time in at least five of those months, he doesn't venture out to the beach that night.

All in all, it's really not Izuku's day.

Against all odds, he gets in.

All-Might meets him at the Screaming Beach, with the ghostly woman in tow and his hand held up for a high-five. Izuku blinks at it for a moment, bewildered, before summoning up the courage to return it. Who would he be to leave the Number One Hero hanging?

"So, um, my arm," Izuku says, trying not to talk too loudly over the wails that All-Might can't even hear. "And my legs. Was that… supposed to happen?"

"Figured it might."

"What."

All-Might's ghost friend heaves a sigh. "You could have at least warned him, Toshi."

"It can't be helped," All-Might goes on. "You're strong enough to be a vessel, but you're still a raw beginner at using it."

“Which you could have *warned* him about, Toshi,” his ghost grouses at him. “Not everyone can be a big, beefy, *man-beef* like you.”

Izuku manages, just barely, to disguise a stifled snort of laughter as a cough.

“Something the matter?” All-Might asks.

“Yes. No. Allergies.” Izuku forces his face straight again. “So, my arm? Well, more my legs. I sort of understand my arm, I mean I punched a huge robot in the face – I think it was the face, anyway, it was really hard to tell – but what about my legs? All I did was jump, and I completely wrecked both of them-”

“Like I was saying,” All-Might interrupts. “You have a quirk now, after living your whole life without one. You’re not gonna be an expert at it on Day One – because those six months don’t enter into it, kid. That was your first day of possessing One For All, and that makes it *Day One*.”

“You could’ve warned me,” Izuku mutters.

“There wasn’t the time. Besides, it worked out, didn’t it?” All-Might jabs him lightly in the chest, making Izuku look him in the eye. “Remember what you told me, about being stronger? Well, you were right. You *do* have to be stronger. You’re gonna have to work harder than any of the other students. Them, they’ve been living with extra limbs and laser vision and what have you all their lives. Your first hurdle’s behind you, but you’ve still got a long way to go.” He bends a little, so that they’re eye to eye. “And I promise you, I will *help you get there*, understand?”

There’s a swelling feeling in his chest as Izuku nods vigorously. Rei jostles his arm excitedly, and he tries not to let his shaking show.

"And on that note," All-Might continues, reaching into his pocket. "There's something I wanted to show you. I wanted to show you earlier, but... well, look." Izuku steps closer, and All-Might holds out a pair of photographs. They're both pictures of Izuku, a before-and-after comparison to show off his progress. In one, he's the skinny kid he remembers being. In the other, taken the morning that he finished cleaning the beach, he's filled out his own frame, replaced scrawny arms with defined musculature.

In both, his pupils are glinting red from the flash.

"I was considering fixing that," All-Might says sheepishly. "But I'm not the best with technology, I'm afraid."

"It's fine," Izuku assures him. "That kind of always happens, actually. My mom says it's a nightmare trying to get my picture taken."

"Well, if it can't be helped... not the point, in any case. Your progress speaks for itself." All-Might pauses to look him carefully in the eye. "Remember, you got to this point through your own hard work. It's gonna take more hard work to keep you moving forward from here. The stronger you become, the better handle you'll have on One For All. It will take work, and it will take time. But for now… you've earned a break. Enjoy it while it lasts, and keep your strength up. You're a Yuuei student now, and they don't let up for beginners."

"I won't let you down," Izuku blurts.

"Good."

They're about to leave. The moon is high and bright, and Izuku buzzes with eager energy and glowing pride, and if it weren't for those two things, it may not have happened. It's a chance in a million, really. At precisely the right moment, Izuku turns his head to admire his handiwork of six months, and sees moonlight glint on something in the sand.

No.

No, it couldn't be.

Izuku jogs to the object, sending up sand in his wake, eyes fixed on the tiny glint of reflected moonlight. He slows as he approaches it, not wanting to kick sand over it and lose it again. He stoops, sweeps some of the sand away, and picks up a silver ring from the beach.

It's a simple band, set with a small diamond-like stone. An engagement ring, by the looks of it. It's a little dirty from lying on the beach, but it still shines.

All-Might calls to him from across the sand. "Midoriya! Everything all right?"

"Um, go on ahead!" Izuku calls back. "I'll get home fine!" He stays where he is, under the pretense of admiring the moonlight on the waves, until he's sure All-Might has gone.

He never did touch the old sedan during his cleanup. It looks a lot lonelier now than it ever did before, one last spot of litter tarnishing the horizon. Izuku comes to a halt a few feet away from the driver's side door, and holds out the ring in his palm.

Silence falls.

"You found it."

Izuku turns around carefully. The weeping ghost stands in the sand, looking for a split second just as horrible and mangled as she did the first time Izuku saw her. Then he blinks, and she stands before him whole again, pale and thin in a spotless cardigan and skirt.

"You found it." Tears well up in her eyes, and she steps forward and reaches for it. "I wanted to look for it… to show him I only lost it. I wasn't leaving… he'll cut the brakes if I leave." An inch away from the ring, her hand halts. Izuku can't tell whether her form is flickering, or she really is shivering. More tears come, and her voice trembles and cracks. "Only… I don't really have to worry about that. Do I?" Blank white eyes, shining with ghost light and tears, meet Izuku's. "Because he already did."

"I'm sorry." Izuku's voice is thick from the ache in his throat. "I'm sorry he did that to you. You didn't deserve that." He glances down at the ring. "He's in jail now, you know. He didn't get away with it. He won't be able to hurt anyone else."

"Good. That's good." The woman's hand is clearly shaking now. "My name's Sachi. Thank you for finding my ring."

"Happy to help."

"I'm sorry." Sachi sniffles, and lowers her hand back to her side. "I'm sorry, I made you go through all of that trouble for nothing. I don't want it anymore."

"That's okay," Izuku says. "I don't think you need it. And it wasn't for nothing. It really wasn't."

"I can't remember – the last time somebody helped me. Just because." Sachi lifts her hand again, but only to wipe her eyes. "Thank you. Thank you so much. I won't forget this."

Izuku smiles. "I don't think I will either. I don't know if I can explain it, but you sort of helped me, too. Thank you."

Sachi doesn't reply, but she nods.

"Do you think..." Izuku's throat bobs as he swallows. "Are you going to be okay now?"

"I think… yes." Sachi smiles through her tears, and it's one of the brightest smiles Izuku's ever seen. "I think… I think I can go now. I'm okay. I'm going to be okay."

By the time Izuku blinks away the tears in his eyes, she's gone. The car is empty. The beach is silent.

He sniffles a little and wipes his eyes. A chill in the air makes him look up, to see Rei hovering nearby, beaming.

"How about you, huh?" he asks. "Think you'll ever…?"

She looks thoughtful at this, then shrugs, and flits closer to give his arm a hug.

"Well, okay," Izuku says. "If you're sure."

He goes home, and his limbs are heavy but his heart is light.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Izuku is no stranger to fear.

He's an expert at fear. He breathes through a pounding heart, eats through butterflies in his stomach, and sleeps through creaking doors and moaning in the walls. When fear comes knocking, he greets it like an irritating roommate and goes on with his day.

And yet, when Bakugou's glare burns a hole in the back of his head, he wants to run. When Bakugou follows him outside, he wants to hide. When Bakugou grabs him by the shoulder and shoves him up against a wall, he wants to curl up and wait for him to go away. But he can't, not with Bakugou holding him upright. So instead, Izuku feels himself freeze up again. Rei tries to drag Bakugou away from him, but it won't work. It never does. The noises around him sound oddly muffled, as if he's wearing ear plugs, but it's not enough to block out what Bakugou is saying.

"What dirty goddamn trick did you use to pass the exam? Answer me, you little shit!"

Izuku doesn't answer. He can't, not when his tongue is locked in his mouth. It's all he can do just to stare dumbly at Bakugou's face. *It won't happen. He won't do it. There's no way for him to do it even if he wanted to. And he won't. I'll he'll do is yell at me like he always does. It won't happen. It won't.*

"-you fucking listening to me? I was supposed to be the first to get into Yuuei from this shitty school! And you pissed all over that!"

Izuku stares at him, silent and frozen and as blank as TV static. *He won't do it again. It won't happen.* Bakugou's grip on his shoulder is tight enough to bruise, just like the ghost on the beach – the beach where he trained, where he bled and puked and sweated for six months until the day of the exam. The mantra fades, and frustration puts new thoughts in his head. *It wasn't a trick. It was me. I earned it. All-Might said so. It's not about you. It wasn't a trick.*

"I told you to go someplace else, you fuck!" Bakugou shakes him roughly, and the back of Izuku's head knocks against the wall behind

him.

My friends are scarier than you are.

Izuku locks eyes with Bakugou again, unblinking, all his senses muffled.

“Does it make you feel big?” he asks.

And Bakugou is the first to blink.

“What-”

“Does it make you feel big, to hurt someone who won’t fight back?”

Bakugou’s eyes narrow. His lips curl, showing his clenched teeth. “What the fuck are you talking about-”

“Does it make you feel strong, beating on kids who don’t have quirks?” Part of him, a small part, is screaming at him to shut up before he makes Bakugou angry enough to hit him. But what will that do? It’s just a hit. All it can do is leave a bruise or make him bleed. “Does it make you feel brave, when they’re scared of you?”

“Shut the fuck up,” Bakugou snarls, and Izuku sees sparks and smoke in the hand that grips his shoulder.

The worst – the very worst he can do to you, is kill you by accident.

“You’ll have to,” Izuku says without thinking.

“I’ll have to what?” Bakugou spits back.

“Kill me. If you want to stop me.” All-Might smiles to trick the fear inside him, so Izuku smiles at Bakugou. “If you don’t, then I’m going to Yuuei.” Izuku watches Bakugou’s eyes in the same way he’d watch the lights of an oncoming train. “Or do you just want me to cry, Bakugou? Will that make you feel big?”

Bakugou lets go.

It’s weird – for a moment it’s like Bakugou hasn’t even noticed he’s let go. But he does, and he seems almost surprised when it happens.

Movement returns to Izuku’s legs, and he slides away from the wall and out of Bakugou’s reach. He doesn’t run. He walks, and Bakugou doesn’t follow.

Times like these make Izuku painfully aware of how fundamentally useless his quirk is.

Not One For All – One For All is cool and amazing and exactly what he needs to become a pro hero. Or, at least, it will be once he figures out how to use it without completely obliterating his arms and legs. That's a habit he'd rather break as soon as possible.

But he hasn't yet, which is a problem when the first order of business on the first day of school turns out to be a quirk assessment test, and he's liable to get kicked out if he scores low enough. Since he's not interested in ending his first day of school with a trip to the hospital, he's going to have to make do with what he had before One For All.

But, as Izuku has long accepted since he was old enough and sufficiently self-aware to navel-gaze about his own quirk, seeing ghosts isn't going to help him run fast, jump high, or do more squats. So hopefully, his six months of grueling training will pan out and keep him from getting expelled on his first day.

The school athletic field is abuzz with conversation, and not just from his chattier classmates. There are ghosts here, not necessarily tied to the place or haunting anyone, but simply passing through and watching the world around them. As Izuku bounces on the balls of his feet and waits for the tests to start, he happens to glance over and see Rei standing at the sidelines, pale and washed out against the bright green turf, watching him through a part in her hair like she's peeking through a curtain.

Izuku checks his peripherals to make sure no one notices, and flashes her a quick smile and a wave. She perks up, lifting her head so that more of her hair falls away from her face, and bounces a little as she waves back.

"Hey, did you see that? Did he just wave?" Izuku almost panics, but relaxes when the speaker turns out to be another ghost drifting by, a teenager with a hole in his temple that still leaks blood. "Hey, little girl. Did that guy just wave at you?" She nods vigorously. "Holy shit. Can he – can he *see* us?"

Oh, why not. Izuku locks eyes with the ghost, grins, and winks. The guy's face lights up like it's New Year's Eve.

Word travels fast among the dead. Before long, Izuku has a little audience at the sidelines. Rei is still at the front, watching eagerly as

the quirk assessment tests begin.

He wishes he could have given a better account of himself in front of them, he really does. By all accounts, he should have been able to. Sixth months of training was hardly nothing, right? He's been eating better, strengthening himself at almost every available moment, building up his stamina to levels he never dared dream of before. But for every test, every race, every assessment of every possible athletic ability under the sun, there is always someone better. There is always someone, or two, or three or more, whose quirks are perfect for blowing his attempts out of the water. Iida's speed lets him dominate the sprint. Uraraka's gravity manipulation makes the long jump a joke. Satou does push-ups like a man possessed (so to speak).

Izuku, in the meantime, has… an extra cheering section that no one else can see.

That's…

Well, it's not nothing.

"Hey, buddy, you're doing great!"

"Yeah, c'mon, kid, keep your chin up! You're faster than I ever was back when I had lungs!"

"Don't give up!"

"Did you see those other two? You left 'em in your dust! Keep it up!"

Rei hops up and down, though her feet never actually touch the ground. Her hair twists in an unseen wind and reveals light-swallowing black pits for eyes, and her cheering sounds a little bit like a Ringwraith, but it's still a nice feeling. The voices of the dead drown out Bakugou's jeering, and let him focus on something that's not Aizawa's cold stare.

In spite of himself, Izuku smiles. His power might not be good for hero work, but it's nice for not feeling alone sometimes.

Still, his stomach turns as he picks up a ball for the pitching test. He's almost done with the tests. Maybe what he really needs to do is go all out, just once. He hasn't gotten the chance to show off his quirk (his second one, at least) and he's not sure the rest of the tests are good for showing off One For All. Maybe if he blows everything now, it'll still be okay. Maybe all he has to do is get Aizawa's attention and prove

that he can at least do *something*. That's what the point of this assessment is, isn't it? Showing him where he is, in terms of power?

It's worth a shot, at least. And by that, it means it's the only thing Izuku can think of.

One shot of One For All, and he'll probably be out for the count but at least he'll have made some kind of an impression.

The ghosts whoop loudly as his throwing arm ripples with energy. Izuku winds up for the pitch, focuses on the cheering, and-

Silence.

Izuku is is about to swing his arm for the throw when the voices egging him on vanish. The feeling of cotton-thickness in his ears makes him look up, searching the sidelines for what might have made the ghosts go quiet, and finds himself staring at empty grass. The ghosts are gone, and Rei – his mute, terrifying nightmare of a best friend, who's hardly strayed from his side since he was seven years old – is nowhere to be seen. The only people left watching are his living, breathing classmates, and there are nineteen of them plus one homeroom teacher but the athletic field feels suddenly so very empty.

The shock of silence, of the split-second powerful feeling of being alone, breaks Izuku's concentration. He loses his grip on One For All, which throws off the weight of the pitch. The ball sails forward about twenty meters before bouncing pitifully on the ground.

For a moment, panic rushes through Izuku with such force and volume that he can't even react beyond a blank stare. The ghosts left? Why would they leave? They didn't just lose interest and decide to, they vanished in the middle of yelling encouragement. And why would Rei leave? Did something happen to them? *Could* something happen to ghosts?

"I erased your quirk." Aizawa's voice cuts through his numb, mute shock, and he startles like a rabbit and doesn't quite manage to muffle a quiet noise of alarm. Among his classmates, someone giggles.

"W-what?" His heart beats frantically, and Izuku distantly recognizes the fluttery pain in his chest, and the heavy pit in his stomach, as nothing short of *fear*.

(Isn't it backwards that he's frightened because of the absence of ghosts?)

Aizawa's starting to look like a ghost himself, with the pale face and red-rimmed eyes and dark hair rising as if on an unseen wind. Izuku takes in the scarf, the goggles, and the strange quirk, and the realization of just who his homeroom teacher is hits him full force.

"You have no idea how to use your quirk properly, do you?" Eraserhead says coldly, stepping forward. His scarf ripples around him as if it has a life of its own. "What, did you believe someone would save you if you crippled yourself again?"

Bad judgment call bad judgment call should've stuck with the original plan-

The scarf wraps around him, jerking him forward, and another flash of panic turns his vision white for a moment. Fight or flight instinct kicks in, and as Aizawa's voice fades to the background of his own thunderous pulse in his ears, Izuku manages to glance down at his own hand. He twitches his finger experimentally, and is rewarded by a spark of One For All in his fingertip.

He erased my quirk, he realizes through the pounding in his ears. *But he erased the wrong one.*

"Face it, Midoriya Izuku." Aizawa's voice, flat and cold, brings him out of his panic and back to the present. "With a power like that, you'll never become a hero."

A moment passes, and Aizawa's hair falls back into his face, Izuku's ears pop as the voices of the dead return and he *oh wow that's where she went.*

Rei is no longer watching at the sidelines. Her face is no longer pale, her eyes no longer dark. It's like the color has been reversed – her entire form, from her skin to her nightdress to her hair, is the kind of black that swallows light and lets nothing reflect back. The only whiteness left is in the eerie pale light that shines out of her eyes and her mouth (mouths are not supposed to be that way, lips are not supposed to stretch that wide, sweet little girls are not supposed to have fangs that bristle like dark thorns against the glow). Her writhing tendrils of hair put the scarf to shame as they whip and slither around his teacher's arms and throat, and her fingers stretch and curve into hard, spindly claws to rake at him. Her mouth stretches wide like a crocodile, and she gives vent to her fury inches from Aizawa's face. Izuku's ears burn with her screaming, and her rage presses him like a

hot iron.

Aizawa blinks slowly at him. “Something the matter?”

“Let go,” Izuku blurts out before he can stop himself. Aizawa raises an eyebrow at him. “I mean, um. Please? You should probably… so I can… throw. The ball.”

Aizawa looks bored, but he complies and turns away to watch by the sidelines again. It’s not until the scarf is well away from Izuku that Rei gives one final shriek, swipes at the back of Aizawa’s head, and backs off. The darkness fades, and a pale little girl stands at Izuku’s side once more.

He can’t stop *shaking*.

Did he give himself away? Did Aizawa notice? How the hell is he going to get through this one? Maybe it won’t be so bad. Maybe All-Might will speak up for him. Maybe instead of getting expelled, he’ll be transferred to a different class. That’d be okay. That’d be–

Cold fingers close around his free hand. Izuku twitches in surprise and looks down to see his friend clutching at his hand with both of hers, staring up at him with wide, concerned eyes. She makes a soft humming noise, like the distant buzz of flies.

The shaking stops. Izuku takes a deep breath, manages a smile, and tries, as surreptitiously as he can, to give her hands a comforting squeeze.

It must have been scary for her too, if he suddenly couldn’t see her.

He glances to the sidelines to find the crowd of ghosts right where they were last, watching and waiting eagerly. None of them have left.

Well. Whatever the outcome, he might as well give them something worth seeing. Izuku’s fingers curl around the ball, and he remembers how he brought a spark of One For All just to his fingertip. An idea forms in his head, and it might be just crazy enough to work.

He can finish the rest of the tests with just nine fingers, can’t he?

It’s been so long since Nana last walked Yuuei’s halls. The feeling is nostalgic, almost painfully so, and it’s this and only this that makes leaving Toshi’s side bearable.

Ever since the fight with All For One six years back, ever since her faithful successor came within a hair's breadth of joining her, Nana has kept as close to Toshi's side as possible. It's easy; she needs neither sleep nor food nor rest of any kind, and she has existed for long enough that patience is a trifle. Usually, straying too far from him brings a rising note of panic that can't be calmed by anything but rushing back to his side, checking and double checking that he hasn't died while her back was turned.

He seems so desperately fragile now. He's a grown man, of course, weathered and beaten by years of hero work, but no matter how much time passes, part of her will never see anything but the gawky, bright-eyed teenager he was when she first laid eyes on him.

And oh, how he *has* grown, and gained a student of his own into the bargain.

But for now, Yuuei feels safe. She hasn't felt this calm and at ease since the last time she set foot in her graveyard and looked upon the earth beneath which she was buried. Yuuei feels like home, and for the first time in many years, Nana feels all right about wandering away from Toshi. There's hardly any danger in him creeping down to watch Aizawa teach his first class of the year. So she drifts through the place on her own, peeking into classrooms and labs, exploring the school where she came into her own.

It's different in many ways, and in many others it hasn't changed a bit.

She loses track of time, and before she knows it, the day is over and she's ended up circling back to the nurse's office. Hopefully Toshi hasn't left yet – probably not. She can catch up fairly easily if he has. Nana turns to leave, just as the door to the nurse's office opens and shuts.

"Oh! Um, excuse me," a voice says behind her, but she's too focused to bother eavesdropping on a conversation that has nothing to do with her anyway.

Rapid footsteps follow her. "W-wait! Um, miss? Excuse me?"

A child blocks her way, and Nana would skid to a halt if her feet actually touched the ground. It's the little ghost again, the eerie dark-haired girl that follows faithfully in Midoriya Izuku's shadow. She's smiling, and it's all teeth.

"Excuse me," the now-familiar voice says once more, and Nana

glances back to see what the fuss is all about–

–and meets Midoriya's eyes dead-on.

The moment she's looking at him, his face breaks out in a freckled smile. He speaks to her.

"Hello."

Nana *shrieks*, taking out one of the fluorescent light panels in the ceiling. Without meaning to, she ends up halfway down the hall from him in the blink of an eye. The child ghost laughs, and it sounds like static on a broken television.

"S-sorry!" Midoriya jogs to catch up. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. Are you okay?"

"Ebbuh," is the first thing Nana Shimura ever says to her successor's student.

His smile softens, and he checks over both shoulders before addressing her again. "I get that a lot. Sorry I didn't talk to you sooner, it's just that the past few months have been really busy and you were always really close to All-Might, so it was kind of a mix of me being tired and distracted and just never getting the chance. But I'm glad I caught you now." He holds out his hand. "It's nice to meet you! I'm Midoriya Izuku, but I uh, think you know that already. What's your name?"

Nana gapes at him for another solid fifteen seconds before she finds her voice again. "It's – um, I'm – it's Shimura. Shimura Nana. What-"

"Do you need help with anything?"

Whatever Nana was expecting him to say, that wasn't it. "I'm sorry?"

"Do you need any help?" Midoriya repeats, letting his hand drop to his side again. "It's fine either way, it's just, y'know, I usually just. Offer. I mean, do you need me to pass a message? Or find something? Or… are you good?"

"I could really use an explanation, actually," Nana says faintly. "Um. *How?*"

Midoriya opens his mouth to reply, then glances back at the nurse's office. "Not here. It's not safe, I don't think. Is it okay if we take this outside?"

For a moment Nana's about to say yes, absolutely, let's go outside and please explain to me literally everything, but then she remembers the time and her self-imposed duty. "You know what, hold that thought, I need to go back to – to *All-Might*." *Damn,* she thinks. *Damn, damn, damn,* how many times has she addressed Toshi by name in the boy's presence? "So I need to go, but later, definitely later, we will have a, a conversation. Of some sort."

"Sure thing!" Midoriya beams at her. "Maybe we can talk tomorrow, Ms. Shimura? I'll try to stay clear of the nurse's office so we have the chance. Have a good evening, then." And he trots off, pretty as you please, with a stringy-haired ghost girl drifting in his wake.

She stares after him, gobsmacked, long after he's left.

"What the shit."

Chapter End Notes

CW: Bullying

Chapter 5

No one had ever bothered to tell Toshinori that teaching was going to be this… complicated.

From the receiving end, it all seemed so simple. He went in with an empty head, and his teachers filled it. He got things wrong, and they set him rught.

But being a teacher, as it turns out, is far more complicated than being a pro hero.

The Heroes Vs. Villains exercise is, in his humble opinion, a relative success. He's already gotten a handle on his students' various quirks from watching Aizawa's class the previous day, but now he has a better feel for them as potential combatants. There's a world of difference, after all, between seeing them use their quirks to raise their athletic scores, and seeing them use their quirks in a conflict.

In spite of the overall success of his first class, he spends most of the day pushing aside the little twist of unease in his gut. The first match bothers him, and continues to do so throughout the day. Young Iida and Uraraka seem to be all right, and their performance was exemplary. But as for the other two…

Midoriya spends the rest of class in the nurse's office, and Toshinori catches it from Recovery Girl when he ducks in to check on his student and hide after his time runs out.

"Why did you let them go so far?" she scolds him. "It's the second day of school, and this is the third time he's been in here!"

"My apologies-"

"It's not me you should be apologizing to!" Recovery Girl's eyes nearly squinch shut, she's glaring at him so hard. "What on *earth* were you thinking?"

"I…" Toshinori's voice trails off, and he turns his head to look at Midoriya. His right arm is a mess, limp and slightly misshapen, dark with bruises where bandages don't cover it. One For All is a miracle of a quirk, but it abuses any wielder who isn't ready for it. For Toshinori, it puts a strain on his wasted form that leaves him retching blood. For Midoriya, one flick breaks his bones.

And yes, he had an inkling that it would end this way, when he was observing. But after how the match had started, Toshinori hadn't the heart to force the boy to end it on such a note.

"I was thinking I'd made a bit of an error," Toshinori says at length.

"Oh, an *error*," Recovery Girl says acidly. "And when did that occur to you? Before or after he finished things by shattering every bone in his right arm?"

"Shortly after the match started," Toshinori replies. Recovery Girl blinks, and for a moment her anger gives way to surprise.

"Oh?"

"It's possible that the first mistake I made was assigning those particular teams to oppose each other," he explains. "The selection was random and I didn't know – I'd assumed they were friends, after…" He shakes his head. "Midoriya certainly never said anything."

"All-Might," Recovery Girl says with forced patience. "I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about."

"It's… difficult to explain."

The match started not with a punch, but a grab. Bakugou ambushed them with an explosion, and the second Midoriya was within range , reached out and closed his hand around Midoriya's upper arm.

Toshinori expected to see it come to blows. He expected Midoriya to hit back, or worse, for Bakugou to activate his quirk while still holding him. The boy was a bit of a hothead, after all.

But the moment Bakugou's hand was on him, Midoriya stopped moving.

That wasn't right – Bakugou was strong, certainly, but he was only holding one part of him. Midoriya wasn't trapped, not by a long shot.

Toshinori searched the surveillance cameras, hunting for a better angle than the back of his successor's head, but there was none. Damn it all, if only he could see the boy's face!

"Thought so." Bakugou's voice was smug when Toshinori heard it over the students' communicators. "What's the matter, Deku? I thought you had a quirk now. You still gonna freeze up like a corpse?"

Uraraka's voice rang out, high and worried. "Deku! Deku, what's the

matter?" Her tone turned accusing. "What did you do to him?"

"Nothing. Don't need *to do anything to him. Too bad you got saddled with him as a partner – what, you didn't know he folds like a wet fucking towel every time somebody grabs him?"*

And that's not true, Toshinori thought. He'd taken the boy by the shoulder multiple times. He'd seen the other students do it – he even saw Aizawa trap him just the day before. But never before has he seen young Midoriya simply stop moving.

" Useless Deku's a weak nerd," Bakugou added . "Always has been ."

Uraraka save d the day then, by losing her temper and shouting.

"You leave him alone*, you big bully!"*

Midoriya jolted as if jerked awake, twisting out of Bakugou's grip. "Not useless*-" He leaped back in a retreat, yelling at Uraraka to run. Bakugou lunged again, poised to throw a punch–*

This time, Midoriya was ready. It was all Toshinori could do to keep from cheering when he threw Bakugou over his shoulder – mustn't play favorites, must remain impartial. And then Uraraka was gone and Izuku was off and running again.

"You've been lying your ass off this entire time, haven't you?" Bakugou shouted after him hoarsely. "All this time you've had a quirk, and you've been feeding everyone bullshit! Get back here, Deku!"

Over the frequency, Toshinori could have sworn he heard a strangled sob.

"I certainly didn't intend to, but I shouldn't have set them against each other so soon," Toshinori says at length. "I don't know details, but they seem to have a bit of a history. I think young Midoriya had to, ah, resolve some things." His brow furrows. "Exorcising old ghosts, I suppose." On the cot, Midoriya mutters and stirs, but does not awaken.

"Well, that's all well and good." Recovery Girl harrumphs a little. "But if he's to be your successor, All-Might, then you mustn't indulge him when he puts life and limb on the line so early in his development."

"…Well he *did* win," Toshinori points out.

"Not without destroying half a building and every bone in his arm!"

she snaps. “All-Might, you should know better than to let a boy so young into such a dangerous practice fight when he’s emotionally vulnerable!”

“If I’d known-”

“You didn’t. But it’s no excuse not to exercise good judgment.” Her glare softens, but only slightly. “You’re a teacher now, All-Might. And in that respect you’re as much a raw beginner as he is. You have a responsibility to children, not just yourself or some nebulous ideal of peace. You won’t get this done by cracking heads and following your heart – it’s time you learned to use some *sense*, dear.”

And so, Toshinori gives it a try. His emotions, his impulses, and his gut feelings are pushing him to side with his successor, to eye young Bakugou with distrust and suspicion and get to the bottom of things through Midoriya’s side of the story and his side only. But his sense reminds him of the frozen, helpless look on young Bakugou’s face after the match ended. His common sense, quiet and meek but irritatingly right, tells him that Bakugou’s swollen pride does not call for disdain, but correction. He is a boy like any other; he needs to be helped in his shortcomings, not simply punished for them.

He catches up to the boy as Bakugou trudges down the school’s front steps, accidentally scaring the life out of him if the boy’s yell is any indication. Whoops, better back it up, mustn’t scare him off before he’s had the chance to say anything.

“Bakugou!” he begins. “I’ll tell you this once! Self-confidence is indeed a vital thing, and you’re not mistaken in thinking you have talent befitting a pro! But from here on out-”

Bakugou surprises him by rounding on him and yelling back. “Well FAT LOT OF GOOD THAT DID ME, RIGHT?”

Toshinori wastes a moment tripping over his train of thought. “Er.”

“Oh, *wonderful.*” Sarcasm drips from Bakugou’s voice. “I have *talent.* How much talent do I have if *Deku* read me like a goddamn book and made me look like an *idiot* in front of the entire class?”

Who on earth is Deku, is the first thought that comes to mind, before he remembers Bakugou shouting it earlier, and the kanji that spell his successor’s given name and… oh… well that’s not very nice. “Come now, does it bother you so much?” he asks. “It shouldn’t, you know. It’s your second day, and you have much to learn-”

“You don’t know him!” Bakugou snaps, teeth bared in a grimace. It looks like anger, but that’s only a mask, and it’s a rapidly fraying one. The boy has tasted defeat, and it *frightens* him. “I’ve known him my entire fucking life, and he’s a weakling! He’s always been a weakling! He’s never had a quirk, and now suddenly he’s-” His words trail off into noises of incoherent frustration.

Understanding dawns then, and he places his hands on his hips. “And now suddenly,” Toshinori finishes for him. “He’s beaten you at something.”

Bakugou’s eyes flash.

“Like it or not,” Toshinori says. “He’s beaten you. You lost today, and unless I miss my guess, you will lose quite a lot by the time you graduate.”

“He must have cheated,” Bakugou hissed. “He cheated, or he’s been tricking me this whole time-”

“And if he has, what difference would it make?” Toshinori asks. “You saw the rest of the matches, same as I did. What do you think of your new classmates, my boy?”

His student doesn’t answer aloud, but he draws his shoulders up and clenches his fists until his quirk pops like a handful of bang snaps. Toshinori can almost hear his jaw creak. After a moment, Bakugou’s answer comes out, muffled and tight and addressed toward the ground. “Can’t beat them.”

“That’s because, young Bakugou, you are starting from the bottom,” Toshinori informs him. “Same as the rest of them. Your pride will get you nowhere. I don’t know what anyone else has been telling you, but this is Yuuei, the alma mater of half the top heroes in the country. You aren’t special here.”

That gets a rise out of him. “Well so what!” Bakugou bursts out, and his eyes snap up to Toshinori’s face. “You haven’t seen *anything* yet! He just beat me once! That’s all there is to it! And that ponytail girl and the ice guy – fuck it, it doesn’t matter! I don’t care how strong anyone else is, ‘cause I’m gonna get stronger!” His eyes narrow as they meets Toshinori’s. “I’m gonna surpass them, and then I’m gonna surpass you, too. I’m gonna vault straight over you as the top hero.”

Toshinori blinks. *Heavens, he sure told me.* For a moment he hunts for a proper reply, for some pearl of educational wisdom to bestow on the

boy, but his mind is blank. In the end, all he can say is, “I look forward to it.”

The conversation ends there, leaving Bakugou to return home and Toshinori to wander back to the teacher’s lounge to power down and sift through his thoughts. He’s already pushed himself past his limits in order to appear to Bakugou, and he can’t risk being seen by his other students in his emaciated state, so he probably won’t have time to catch Midoriya for a talk before the boy goes home for the day.

Did he do that right? He didn’t mess that up, did he? It didn’t feel like a screw-up.

Time will tell, he decides eventually. He’s lit a fire under young Bakugou, that’s for sure. He only hopes it was the right thing to do, and that he has the chance to do the same for Midoriya and all the rest of them.

“What’s with you?” Aizawa asks as he passes him on the couch.

“Teaching is hard.”

“*Ha*,” Aizawa laughs, but it doesn’t sound like a laugh. “Ha. Ha. Welcome to hell, Number One. You have no one to blame but yourself.”

Nana is equal parts irritated and impressed.

As it happens, Midoriya doesn’t quite manage to stay out of that nurse’s office. In fact, Nana ends up waiting for him to emerge for the entire day before he finally shows his face in the hallway again.

“Nice take-down back there,” she says, and is a little disappointed when he barely acknowledges her, rather than jumping like she hoped he would. His ever-present ghost girl sidekick must have warned him somehow. “Too bad about what you had to do to grab that win, holy *shit*, kid, be more careful. You keep throwing One For All around like that and you’re gonna turn your skeleton into oatmeal before the year’s out.” If she speaks to him with a level of gusto, she can hardly be blamed. This is the first time in years that she’s been able to be witty in front of a live audience.
To her immense disappointment, he continues to barely acknowledge that she’s there as he keeps walking. Worried, Nana flits to catch up.

“Hey, come on now,” she says, eyeing the sling that currently graces

his arm. “I didn’t mean anything by it. Hey. Kiddo. I didn’t just imagine you seeing me yesterday, did I?”

“Oh, uh. No. Sorry.” He has the grace to look sheepish, and as he heads back toward his classroom she notices that he’s taking the long way back.

“You’re gonna be late,” she points out.

“I’m already late,” he says, sounding too tired to force cheerfulness into his voice.

Ever persistent, Nana ducks around to get a better look at his face. It’s blank as an empty chalkboard, but there’s a tightness to his jaw that warrants investigation. “What’s the matter? It was a tough fight back there, but you still technically won.”

Glassy green eyes turn to her briefly before returning to the floor ahead of him. “I know.”

“You’re dawdling on the way back, too. How come?”

He mumbles something.

“Speak up, kiddo, my ears are way up here.”

“I don’t want to see Bakugou.”

“The firecracker kid? Him?” Nana tries to nudge him playfully. “C’mon, Midoriya, you’ve already proven yourself. I mean sure, it was a rough start. You froze up – it happens. Doesn’t mean you didn’t flip him like an omelet, too.”

“I don’t want to talk to him.”

This is getting her nowhere. Nana sighs heavily. “Suit yourself, I guess. You still up to talk to me, then?”

“Oh, right!” He blinks and perks up again, smiling at her, though she questions how genuine it is. “So… you had questions yesterday?”

“I have *every* question.” Nana shakes her head. “First off, how is this even happening? How are we having this conversation? You’re alive, I’m dead. But you see me. How?”

“How do you think?”

She gives him a sour look.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t be flippant.” Midoriya gingerly adjusts the sling. “Well, short answer is, it’s my quirk.”

The answer doesn’t exactly surprise Nana, but it still twists at her gut – or whatever it is ghosts have. “…Which you said you didn’t have, six months ago,” Nana points out, her tone biting. Her pity and worry are fading fast.

Midoriya looks away, then at the floor again. “...Yeah.”

Nana tries to keep her voice even, but she can’t quite manage it. She’s a little pissed, and why wouldn’t she be? This kid put on his sad, wobbly eyes and fed Toshi some pile of poor-little-quirkless bullshit while keeping him in the dark about the truth. Who does he think he is? “You lied to him,” she says sharply.

“Don’t take it personally. I lie to everyone.”

For a moment Nana’s distracted from her line of questions. She’s only observed him from afar, but what she’s seen of Midoriya has proven him, at least in her eyes, to be… well… not quite sunshine incarnate, but pretty damn close. But right now, he sounds almost… she doesn’t want to use the word “bitter”. It’s not cynical either. Acerbic, maybe? Dry? Tired?

...Those dark circles under his eyes certainly haven’t budged.

Nana sighs, more irritated than angry. “I don’t like that you lied to him,” she says at length. “But I can sort of understand why, with a power like that.” She looks at him again. “Still, I heard everything you said about how much it sucks being quirkless, and I believe you. So it seems to me like you’re missing out on a lot of attention, not shouting a quirk like that from the rooftops.” She pretends not to see him tense. “At the very least you’d probably get that bomber kid to shut up a little.”

“*No*.” It’s forceful enough that it almost echoes in the hallway, and the poltergeist girl gives a low hiss. “I...” Midoriya shakes his head suddenly, as if clearing it. “It’s not that I don’t want to. I *do* want to. But I can’t. It’s not like anyone would believe me anyway.”

“You can’t know that-”

“Except I can.” Midoriya’s uninjured hand curls into a fist. “There’re

these shows, these stupid TV shows. With psychics, you know?"

"Oh," Nana says acidly. "*Those*."

"Right? I mean, some of it's real. The minor psychic stuff like mind-reading is real. Most of it's just people with weaker quirks and a lot of showmanship, and that stuff's fine, it's harmless. But then – then you have people who say they have a quirk like mine, and… well, they have audiences, but it's mostly just people laughing at them, or at the people who believe them." Midoriya stops and turns to her. "And I've watched them. All of them. Every episode, even the ones in other countries. My mom thinks I'm crazy for liking that junk, but I *don't* like it, I just… I keep thinking maybe…" A flicker of desperate sadness crosses his face and vanishes in the next instant. "But it's never for real. They use Ouija boards and seances and stuff like that, and they're either talking to thin air or the ghosts are laughing at them." He pauses, puddling up, and wipes at his eyes with his good hand. "A-and I know that if I try to tell anyone, that's what they'll remember. Just – liars on TV. So I can't tell anyone. Not even All-Might." He meets her eyes, and whatever disapproval still lingering in her vanishes in the face of how much he's absolutely breaking her heart. He looks impossibly young and small and alone. "I'm sorry I lied to him. It – it feels like cheating, having two quirks."

Nana tries to hold her stern look for a few more seconds, and finally sighs with a shake of her head. "Well… don't worry about having two," she says. "God knows you have a lot to worry about, but that's not worth losing sleep over. It's not cheating, and you're not the first."

She knows she's not imagining the note of relief in the way his shoulders slump. "It's pretty useless anyway," he says. "I mean, for a licensed hero. All I can do is just… see and feel things that can't affect anyone else. It's not like I can fight with it, or heal with it. So it's not too much of an advantage. I'm still doing this under my own power."

Nana smiles at him with a good old trademark superhero grin, and together they start walking again. "That's the spirit. Next question, who's your friend?"

Midoriya glances at the ghost girl. "Oh, her? This is Rei. I mean, I don't know what her real name is, she's never told me, so I just call her Rei and she seems fine with it." The girl beams, as if the nickname is a well-beloved present that she likes to show off. "I met her when I was seven. She hid in my closet and tried to scare me, so I shared my toys with her, and we've been friends ever since. I don't know if she

has any unfinished business, but she seems like she's fine with just following me around for now." Rei nods vigorously, dark hair spilling over her face. "She can come out of TVs like Sadako."

"I… see."

"One time I was ignoring her so she came out of my 3DS."

"…Neat." Nana clears her throat awkwardly. "And, last question for now, but you asked me yesterday if I needed help with anything?"

Midoriya perks up again at that. "Yeah! Do you?"

"Nnnnot that I can think of, I was just wondering what you meant by that."

"It's that way for a lot of ghosts," Midoriya explains. "Sometimes the only reason why they stay is because they really, really need to do something that they didn't get to do before they died. Like, one last thing they need to tell someone, or they lost something, or there's a problem they know how to fix and they just need an extra set of hands. That's why I always ask whenever I meet a new ghost. Sometimes I can help. Or sometimes they just need someone to talk to who isn't another ghost."

Nana stares at him, momentarily speechless. "That's… an awful lot for such a young kid to be taking on."

"Yeah but I can do it." Midoriya shrugs. "Maybe I'm the *only* one who can do it. So I'm going to. And I meet a lot of interesting people, which is nice because I never really had any friends before I came to Yuuei. I mean, none that were alive, at least." He hesitates, frowning a little. "That's one of the reasons I want to be a hero. I help people who're already dead all the time. I'd like to *stop* someone from dying for a change."

Nana watches his face, and can't help but shake her head wonderingly. She laughs a little.

"What's so funny?"

"I was just thinking." Nana grins. "You're one weird-ass kid, but I think Toshi made a good choice with you." Realizing her slip, she looks away and mentally kicks herself. "Uh. I mean All-Might."

Nana keeps looking forward, but she feels the kid's eyes on her. He's a

curious one, she realizes with a jolt. A curious kid and an All-Might fan, which is not a good combination for a kid who can see and hear her.

“Soooo, you know All-Might?” Midoriya asks.

Nana heaves a sigh. “Yes I do, but I think you already knew that, which makes that question a little redundant, don’t you think?”

“Uh. Yeah.”

“I’m gonna do something unfair,” Nana continues, halting in the hallway to turn and face him. “But I need to ask you not to lob questions at me about this. There are – there are things that I don’t think he’s ready to talk about yet, and I’m a ghost, kid. I’m dead as a doornail and that means–” She has to pause a moment when the words stop coming. “That means I’m not in his story anymore. I’ve kept his secrets because it’s been impossible for me to do otherwise, but now that it *is* possible, I’d still like to keep them. He’ll tell you these things when he’s ready, I hope, so don’t squeeze me for information before then.”

“That’s… not unfair,” Midoriya says. “And I won’t. I promise. Um. But I *will* say, um, I know it must be kind of lonely, following him when he can’t see you or hear you, so. If you ever, I don’t know. Need someone to talk to? Even if it’s just… the weather, or a joke you heard. I’ll totally – it’s just an offer. You don’t have to. I just thought I’d say...” His voice trails off awkwardly.

Nana chuckles again, shaking her head. “Hell. That’s one kind heart you’ve got, Midoriya. Don’t you let anyone beat that out of you, got it?”

“Oh, uh, of course.”

“Well, good talk. I’d better go. See you ‘round, kid.” Nana turns to leave.

“Wait, um, Ms. Shimura?”

She pauses. “Yes?”

“I did have one question, and um, you don’t have to answer it if you don’t want to.” Midoriya shifts from foot to foot awkwardly. “But… you mentioned One For All, so you must at least know something about it. And I was just wondering if you knew about it before you

died? And how much you know about it? Because if the answer's yes, and a lot, then maybe you could, I dunno, give me some tips?" He cradles his mangled arm. "So this doesn't keep happening."

She considers this for a moment. The teacher in her didn't always exist; Toshi put it there, and now Nana can feel it clamoring to get out. The urge to sweep this little guy under her wing and tell him absolutely everything she knows about One For All is strong. But…

"I really can't," she says reluctantly.

He gives her an utterly crestfallen look. "Can't or won't?"

"Shouldn't," she replies. "Like I said, there are… things I can't talk about, without mentioning things that I know Tosh – All-Might will tell you when he's ready. Or when you're ready." She gives him a rueful look. "I'm dead, kiddo. *He's* your teacher, not me."

"Well… if you're sure…" Midoriya's looking at her like he's a puppy that Nana's leaving in a soggy cardboard box on the side of the road. "Are you sure you couldn't just, I don't know, give me a hint?"

Nana closes her eyes and asks *someone* for patience. She shouldn't do this. She shouldn't usurp a position that isn't hers anymore – a position that she threw away like an *idiot*.

Still, though… puppy eyes were always a weakness of hers, and Midoriya's wielding them with *lethal* precision.. Maybe just a hint? A little nudge?

"Well…" she says at length. "I'm not sure if I can tell you about *One For All*, but I *guess* I could give you a nudge in the right direction. Hmm… Gran could help you." She smiles, inwardly congratulating herself. Gran could certainly help him. Midoriya might not enjoy *how*, but he didn't specify an easy way.

Best let the living handle this one.

"Gran?" Midoriya echoes.

"As in Torino. Old friend of All-Might's." Nana winks broadly at him. "He's as strong a pro as you could ever ask for, but he's a cagey old dog and hard to find, and he won't lift a finger unless he thinks it's worth it."

"Then how do I get him to help me?" Midoriya presses. "I've never

even heard of anyone by that name."

"That's just how he operates. All you need to do is find a way to get his attention – I have a feeling he'll know what's up when he sees it." She taps her chin thoughtfully. "Sports Festival should do it, so you have some time to find your rhythm."

"I'm not sure..." Midoriya glances down at his mangled arm again. "It took me six months just to get strong enough to take One For All in the first place. The Sports Festival-"

"-isn't just about who packs the biggest punch," Nana interrupts, before she can stop herself. "Thank your lucky stars it isn't, kid, or else you'd have to sledgehammer yourself all over again just to stand a chance." He winces. "Hey. An idiot can fling punches around. And you, little Midoriya, are no idiot."

"That's debatable," Midoriya says dryly.

"Is it? I saw the slime monster. That was no lucky shot – you *aimed* for the eyes, didn't you. You knew exactly what you were doing."

"Yeah and a lot of good that did-"

"It did exactly what was needed, and exactly what you need now – it *grabbed the right person's attention*." On an impulse Nana reaches out to ruffle his hair, and is pleasantly surprised when she's able to do so. Her hand musses up his wild curls instead of passing through it like a mirage, and Nana can *feel* it. "And it kept you and your little friend alive long enough for help to come, so that's a plus."

"Mm." Midoriya frowns, looking thoughtful and not necessarily in the good way.

"Hey. Kiddo. Any of this getting through? You did ask." Nana tilts her head, regarding the latest vessel for the power that was once her own. He's little – even littler than Toshi was back then. He's shrimpy and weedy and looks like he hasn't had a proper sleep in a week. And yet, there's a spark to him that she can't deny. "You're new at this, I know. You're new at being this type of strong. Work on getting used to that, work on getting stronger, but don't forget about what you already had going for you." When he blinks up at her, Nana gives him a meaningful poke to the forehead. "Keep exercising *that* muscle, too. Got it?"

"I… think so," Midoriya says. "I guess I can figure it out."

“Good.” Nana places her hands on her hips. “You’re still a raw beginner, kiddo. Sometimes ‘figure it out’ is the best advice you’re gonna get.” She winks. “See you around.”

She vanishes then, flitting off to find Toshi. Guilt nudges at the back of her mind; she’d only wanted to give him a hint, and she’d ended up spilling an entire pep talk on him instead.

Nana tells herself, firmly, that she can’t do that anymore. She has to let Toshi be the teacher, especially since he has no way of knowing she’s still around to help. But the kid asked her to her face, and she couldn’t say no to that face.

But she has to say no. It wouldn’t be fair, otherwise.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There are few things in this world more awkward than running into your teacher while out doing errands.

Toshinori knows this, because he was a teenager once and he knows full well that at that age he would have wished for an invisibility quirk had he ever crossed paths with, say, Gran Torino at the corner store.

So he certainly doesn't mean to put young Midoriya on the spot. How was he supposed to know that his student and chosen successor would be spending his first weekend of the school year visiting the same department store Toshinori was?

He'd only meant to pick up a few groceries on the basement floor. The prices are good, and the selection is better than what the corner store offers. It's a quick, easy trip; it has to be, for him to pull it off in his true form.

People give him a wide berth when they can manage it. Not that it surprises him; even without the bloody vomit, people tend to be put off by his emaciated appearance. He has the kind of look about him that makes mothers point and whisper to their children about the consequences of not eating your vegetables.

The past six years have taught him a lot about tuning people out.

Still, as he gets in the back of the shortest checkout line, he's not tuning them out enough to miss the familiar mess of green-tinged hair that flashes in the corner of his eye. A few aisles down, young Midoriya is facing forward in his own line and hasn't seen him. Toshinori doesn't have a good view of his face, but he seems to be staring off into space. The boy certainly does that a lot.

Should he go up and say hello anyway? Toshinori has been wanting to speak with Midoriya privately ever since the Heroes Vs. Villains exercise, but he just hasn't had the chance. Even after six months of overseeing his strength training, Toshinori never realized just how *slippery* the boy is. It just goes to show; the boy never managed to duck out of training simply because he never tried. He was already

right where he wanted to be.

Would it be strange to approach him now? Toshinori hesitates; the boy has an unfortunate habit of yelling his name on instinct without any regard for witnesses.

I'll catch him on the way out, he decides, and the moment the thought has completed in his head, he reaches the front of the line.

He's just paid for his things when there's a bit of a commotion at the other line. There's a man trying to pay for groceries, but it looks as if he's having problems communicating with the cashier. The customer gesticulates, seemingly ignoring what the cashier is trying to say, or misunderstanding him or… Toshinori can't tell from the distance. As he steps out of the way of the next customer, he watches and wonders what the matter is.

And then Midoriya is there, pushing his way to the front of the line. He approaches cautiously, waving for the troubled customer's attention. As Toshinori watches, Midoriya waits until the man is looking at him, and makes a series of gestures with his hands.

The relief on the customer's face is palpable. He gestures back, and it becomes a silent conversation between the two of them. Midoriya turns, says something to the cashier, signs something to the man, and it goes back and forth between the three of them, with Midoriya mediating the whole conversation.

Well. Toshinori thought the boy was done with surprising him, but it seems that Midoriya has a few left in him.

The customer finishes his transaction and makes another series of emphatic hand signs that Toshinori can only assume are profuse thanks. Midoriya makes his replies and turns to get back in line, but the next customer grins and motions at him to go first. Toshinori sees his student flush with pleasure as he complies. He doesn't have much to buy, and seems eager to duck bashfully away from the cashier's gratitude. He makes his way through, and when he looks up, he meets Toshinori's eyes.

Toshinori braces himself for the possibility of a shouted greeting, but to his relief Midoriya seems to gag himself at the last minute. Rather than calling to him, the boy presses his mouth closed and approaches him with a shy wave.

"Was that sign language?" Toshinori asks once he's within earshot.

“Oh! You, um, saw that?”
“I did.”

“Yeah, it was, um…” Midoriya shrugs. “He was deaf, and he was having trouble talking to the cashier, so… yeah. What are you doing here?” He blinks, then splutters and backtracks a bit. “I-I mean, not that you don’t have as much of a right to be here as anybody else, I mean it’s a public place and a nice store and I didn’t mean—I’m just surprised to see you, and-”

“Calm down, my boy.” Toshinori claps him lightly on the shoulder. “A happy accident, that’s all. I’m just here for grocery shopping. And you?”

“Oh, uh, my mom sent me.” Midoriya holds up his bag. “We needed a new set of dish towels. I, um, also have to go up to the roof, too.”

Toshinori tilts his head. “To the restaurants?”

“Pet supply store,” Midoriya says. “I, uh, need cat food.”

“Ah. In that case, would you mind terribly, my boy, if I accompanied you?”

“What? I mean, n-not at all. Sure.” Midoriya turns and waits for Toshinori to fall in step with him, and the two of them head toward the elevators.

“If you don’t mind my asking,” Toshinori says. “Where did you learn sign language?”

“Oh, it’s just something… I picked it up as a kid.” Midoriya’s voice trails off uneasily, and he doesn’t offer anything more.

“Ah.” It sounds like half an answer, if that. Perhaps it will take a bit of coaxing to get the rest of it out of him. “Well, I suppose we all have to have our hobbies. I do a little gardening from time to time.”

Midoriya looks up at him, shock stamped across his face. “Really? You?”

“Don’t look so surprised, my boy,” Toshinori chuckles. He pauses, tilting his head thoughtfully. “For heroes, it’s good to have things like that. Parts of our lives that have nothing to do with the work. We’d burn out, otherwise. Some take up handicrafts, or learn languages for the fun of it. For me, it’s flowers in window boxes, fresh basil in a pot,

that sort of thing. Takes my mind off things. Smiling can't solve everything, after all."

Midoriya makes a noise to indicate that he's listening, but beyond that he's quiet. He twists the handles of his plastic bag, and finally speaks up again. "Is that really something all heroes do?"

"Of course. Present Mic has his radio show. Aizawa fosters shelter cats —though, you didn't hear that from me."

That gets a laugh out of Midoriya, and some of the nervous tension in his shoulders seems to loosen. "Well, there was–" He chews his lip, hunting for the right words. "I went through this weird phase when I was seven where I didn't want to talk. I was really shy and stuff, so— anyway, my mom didn't want to push me to talk if I didn't want to, so she got some books on sign language, and we learned together." He perks up a little. "It's still really useful, like if we're somewhere loud, or if we split up at the supermarket. It beats yelling at each other from across the distance."

They reach the elevators, and Toshinori presses the button pointing up. Midoriya almost trips as he stops. He bounces a little on the balls of his feet and twists the bag handles again.

"Um," he begins. "I can meet you up there? I'm gonna take the stairs."

"To the roof?"

"Well, yeah." Midoriya grins. "Can't skip leg day, right?"

Toshinori blinks, then has another chuckle. "You really are obsessive." The elevator door opens, but Toshinori ignores it and turns toward the door to the stairwell instead. "Let's get a move on, then."

"Oh! Um, are you sure you…?" Midoriya trots to catch up to him.

"Don't you worry about me." Once the door is closed behind them, Toshinori activates his quirk. "I haven't engaged in any heroics today. Plenty of time on the clock."

"Oh, good." Midoriya sounds relieved.

"Actually, it's fortunate that I've run into you," Toshinori says. One For All makes nine flights of stairs a cinch. "I was hoping to have a word with you."

“Okay,” Midoriya says, a little cautiously. “What about?”

“The exercise on the second day of school,” Toshinori answers. “I was a little concerned, to be honest.”

“R-really?” Caution has turned to outright nervousness. “How come?”

Toshinori considers beating around the bush a bit more and coaxing it out of him, but they only have so much empty stairwell. “I noticed you froze up at the beginning,” he says. He hopes he doesn’t sound too critical—wouldn’t want to shame the boy into silence.

“Oh.” Midoriya looks at the wall as they climb the steps. “That.”

“Also, in case you weren’t aware, I could hear what you all were saying,” Toshinori adds. “While I knew that you and young Bakugou were acquainted, I didn’t know that you had that sort of history.”

“Yeah, w-well, that’s all it is,” Midoriya stammers. “It’s history. New school, new beginning, new people. It’s fine, it’s just…”

“I got an earful from Recovery Girl while you were asleep,” Toshinori admits.

This time Midoriya turns to him, eyes wide. “I’m really sorry, I didn’t mean to-”

“Not your fault, my boy,” Toshinori assures him. “It really is mine, and she was right. I should have ended that match before you had the chance to injure yourself like that.”

Midoriya makes a noncommittal noise and turns his attention to the floor again.

“The reason why I didn’t was that… well, you seemed like you had something to prove,” Toshinori goes on.

“Oh,” Midoriya says. He’s been saying that a lot.

“Did you?”

“Did I what?”

“Did you prove it?” Toshinori asks. “Did you manage to get your point across?”

“Um, maybe?” Midoriya shrugs. “I don’t know. I think I did. Or I just

made him even madder. I don't think—I mean, I can't–" He sighs, looking frustrated. "It's not something I can fix. And if I can, I can't do it in one day. There's just too much that went wrong."

"Would you, er, that is." Toshinori mentally kicks himself for stumbling over his words. "Would you like to talk about it, or…?"

"Not really."

"Fair enough." He's not sure whether to be disappointed to be brushed off, or worried by how uncomfortable young Midoriya seems. "Just know that if you do, I'm willing to listen."

"So, sign language, huh?"

Izuku doesn't reply out loud, but he nods, and Ms. Shimura lets out a thoughtful "huh."

"Might try to learn myself, then," she says. "It'd make it easier for you to talk to me without giving yourself away."

"I can be quiet," he murmurs, moving his mouth as little as possible. He traces his finger over the stacked cans of cat food until he finds the right brand. All-Might, once more in his true form, is currently distracted by the rabbits. Rei's sticking close to Izuku's side, still eyeing Ms. Shimura with wary tolerance.

"Good for you. So, how're things?"

"Well…" Izuku puts a package of cans into his basket. "I've been trying to figure out One For All, like you said. I've been practicing calling it up, and I can do it without any trouble. But I can't use it for anything. Haven't tried." He shoots her a quick glance. "You're sure there's nothing you can tell me that might help?"

"It's not my place, kid," Ms. Shimura tells him softly.

"I'm asking you, though. I'm making it your place."

A sigh. "Look, kiddo I just… I just can't. It wouldn't be fair." Before Izuku can ask her what she means by that, she adds, "I mean, your actual teacher's standing right there, you know."

"I can't get it when I ask him," Izuku murmurs. "He's so good at it that he doesn't even have to try. It just… doesn't come to me like it does for him." A colorful feathered cat toy catches his eye, and Izuku takes

it off the rack and makes his way to the cash register.

“Not your fault, kiddo,” Ms. Shimura assures him. “You’re learning. So’s he.”

Izuku glances at All-Might, frowning. All-Might, learning? He knows, logically, that All-Might must have been a student at some point. But that was long past, and injured or not, he’s the top hero and far and away more powerful than all the others. The thought of him needing to learn anything seems almost absurd.

“Even old dogs can learn new tricks,” Ms. Shimura says, as if reading his mind. “I think you two have a lot to teach other.”

“I thought you said he wasn’t old,” Izuku whispers, and smiles when it brings a chuckle out of her.

The second week of school rolls around. Iida and Yaoyorozu, newly instated as class representatives, waver from time to time in their duties, but Iida especially is taking to it like a duck to water. Privately, Izuku is pleased; as much as he would have liked the position himself, he’s sure Iida will do a better job than he could have.

For one thing, Iida isn’t nearly as easily distracted as he is. Iida doesn’t idly watch the walls when he ought to be paying attention in class. Iida doesn’t mutter things to himself that have nothing to do with the math problems on the board. Iida doesn’t stare off into space and grin and laugh under his breath about jokes he remembers.

Of course, Izuku doesn’t do these things either. And it’s not totally his fault that everyone else thinks he does.

“Midoriya. Hey, Midoriya!” It’s not that Izuku doesn’t like Kirishima; Kirishima’s one of the nicest people he knows, probably. (He’s either secretly mean or a saint, seeing as he actually seems to want to be around Bakugou, for no other reason than just because.) But Rei is neck and neck with another ghost that hangs around the classroom, in a contest to see who can make the most grotesque face, and Izuku can’t tear his eyes away from the spectacle. It’s only when Kirishima playfully swats the back of his head with a workbook from Cementoss’s Modern Literature class that he remembers where he is.

Jarred out of his reverie, Izuku finally manages to look away with a vague blink. “Huh?”

“Oh thank God, I thought we lost you there.” Kirishima grins. “Did you fall asleep with your eyes open or something?”

“No. Just people-watching.” Izuku sneaks another look at the ghosts. Narita, the ghost that’s challenging Rei, takes a turn and manages to make his facial features drip and melt like candle wax. Rei cackles and copies him. A few other ghosts are gathered around spectating, and laugh when Narita follows it up by twisting his head to a grotesque angle and gurgling a scream.

“Seriously?” Kirishima asks.

“It’s a legitimate pastime.” He’s done with most of his school work. Aizawa has given them an hour of study hall while he discusses things with some of the other faculty, and he’s been cagey about what’s scheduled for the week. Izuku’s willing to bet it’s something big.

Kirishima scratches the side of his head. “Well yeah but, don’t you usually do that in public, with strangers?”

One of the ghosts watching Narita and Rei’s antics leaves off chuckling to vomit at least a lungful of water on the floor. Rei’s shriek of discordant laughter makes one of the fluorescent lights flicker. “...I can make do,” Izuku says.

“You must be so bored, dude.”

“It’s not so bad.” The contest seems to have reached a draw; Rei would probably win with some of the faces she makes when Bakugou wanders too close, but Izuku guesses that she’s having too much fun right now to get that serious.

Narita catches him looking and gives him a little wave; Izuku doesn’t wave back, but quirks a small smile at him. To tell the truth, Izuku’s a little curious about Narita; most ghosts at Yuuei just pass through, glance in to ease the humdrum of everyday afterlife, and move out again, but Narita has been here since the first day of school. Izuku remembers seeing him spectating at the Quirk Apprehension test, and he’s seen him almost every day since. He’s not the only ghost that Izuku has seen hanging around the classroom—Mrs. Kitayama pops in from time to time, dripping water on the floor that no one else sees—but he is the one Izuku has seen most often.

It’s hard to miss him. Narita’s younger than most ghosts that Izuku sees; he looks like a third-year in high school, at the very oldest. And besides that, he’s one of those ghosts that don’t feel the need to

change their appearance. The bullet-sized hole in the side of his head is just as visible now as it probably was the day it killed him.

Lunch rolls around eventually, and Izuku's still watching Narita horse around in the classroom. He isn't worried about Narita's presence at all; Narita's one of the most harmless, good-natured ghosts he's ever seen. He's just curious about what his story is. But there's never a good time for a conversation, and Narita doesn't know sign language like Rei does.

He's a quick study, though. Out in the hallway, Narita's the one who who approaches Izuku. "Hey, come this way," he says, drifting ahead. "You want to talk, right? I can see it in your eyes." Izuku nods. " C'mon, then. This place has a bunch of spots people don't pass by too often. I figure you'd want that."

Izuku smiles gratefully and follows the ghost, with the ever-present Rei tagging along close behind. Narita takes them on a winding path through the hallways, until they come to a halt at a quiet, out-of-the-way nook. Rei breaks away from his side to wander off and have a look at the colorful posters and notices on the bulletin boards.

"I don't need anything, if that's what you're about to ask," Narita says. Izuku blinks in surprise, and Narita shrugs and grins. "Some of the other ghosts were saying you asked that. I'm good, though. I don't need your help."

"I'm glad," Izuku says. "I guess… I'm just curious. Were you a Yuuei student?"

Narita snorts. "Me? Nah. My quirk let me un-spoil food. Which was great for, y'know, keeping the fridge fresh. Not so great for hero work."

"Oh." Izuku tilts his head, regarding Narita curiously. "What's so special about this school that makes you stay, then?"

"It's not the school." Narita shakes his head. "I'm not even here all the time. Just when Eraserhead is."

"Aizawa?" Izuku blinks. Of all the answers he could have expected, this wasn't one of them. "Did you know him, when you were alive?"

"Nope. Never even met him. Hell, he's super underground and he hates getting hounded by the media; I'd never even *heard* of him." Narita taps his temple, where the small round hole still oozes blood.

“See this? Not a bullet hole. Got dragged into an alley when I was walking home from school. Nasty bastard had these long claw things, could drill right through your skull with ‘em.” Narita shudders, and for the first time since Izuku has met him, his easy-going demeanor falters. “Dude had serious problems. That was how he got his kicks.”

“That must have been awful,” Izuku says, because there’s really nothing you can say to that that isn’t either insulting or a pointless platitude, and the latter is usually preferable.

“Wasn’t my best Wednesday night, I’ll tell you that much.” Narita shrugs. “So I was following this guy around for a while after that, trying to haunt the shit out of him. Wasn’t working, but it meant I was there when Eraserhead took him down. Easily the most badass thing I’d ever seen. I wish I’d still had my phone.”

“So… you follow Aizawa-sensei because he took down the man who killed you?”

“That’s part of it.” Narita’s smile goes soft. “See, that night? The guy was going after my sister.” Izuku can’t stop the little intake of breath. “Yeah. I was…” Narita bites his lip. “I was pretty sure for a while that she was gonna join me, you know? But then Eraserhead came out of nowhere and kicked the *shit* out of him. And I mean—he curb-stomped that bastard.” His shoulders roll in a shrug. “And then he hung him from a fire escape by his unmentionables, and talked Kanon through a panic attack til the police got there. He was out the second she’d calmed down and the paramedics had her. She was too out of it to thank him. She still regrets that, I think.” Another shrug. “So, I figure, I’ve got nothing better to do, right? If I stick around, I’ll have a better chance to do it for her. I mean, he saves so many people and takes down so many villains he probably doesn’t even remember it, but still. It’d make *me* feel better.”

“Sure you don’t want me to pass it on for you?” Izuku offers.

“Nah. Thanks, though. Me and Mrs. Kitayama wanna do it ourselves, right Mrs. Kitayama?” Narita’s blank white eyes look past Izuku suddenly, and he turns his head to find the ever-saturated Mrs. Kitayama drifting in behind him.

“Oh, goodness, are we talking about Mr. Eraserhead?”

“You want to thank him too?” Izuku says.

“Well, yes. Sort of. It’s a little different from Narita. I actually did

meet him… somewhat." She frowns, and twiddles her fingers, looking faintly uncomfortable. "Well. I think he saw me die."

Izuku's heart sinks.

"My car was in the water. Some villain was attacking, and destroyed a bridge that I was driving across. He dove after us just as the car filled with water, but my seatbelt jammed, and—well. He tried his best. I know he did." Mrs. Kitayama's shoulders slump, but then she squares them again. "But! My son was in the backseat. He was just about to turn five the day the car went under. This year he started middle school, and it's thanks to Mr. Eraserhead that he gets to do that. But he couldn't save both of us, poor man, and I think it affected him at the time."

"…Wow." Izuku's chest feels full of… something. It's a feeling that he can't quite put a name to. Admiration? Sympathy? Awe? Maybe some combination of the three?

"Plus he's super underground, right?" Narita says. "So he always takes off before anyone can get in a thank-you. So people like us—we might as well wait for our chance, you know?

"I don't know for sure if it's something he needs, or even something he wants," Mrs. Kitayama says. "But before I go, I'd like to let him know that… that it's all right with me, what happened. So even if he isn't well known, he'll at least know he was appreciated."

"When his time comes," Narita adds.

For a moment an image flashes across Izuku's mind – of Aizawa-sensei, his teacher who very nearly expelled him on the first day, standing before him pale and washed out, his eyes blank and white instead of bloodshot red. Izuku shuts his eyes and shakes his head to clear away the picture.

"It's gonna happen sometime," Narita reminds him. "Hopefully not for a long-ass time, but it's gonna happen. Everybody dies, kid."

"Yeah." Izuku takes a deep breath, hoping to quell the churning in his stomach. "I know. It was nice talking to you two. Thanks."

"Whatever for?" Mrs. Kitayama asks.

"I'm just… glad to know my teacher is that kind of person." Izuku smiles past the knot of hurt that often forms in his chest when ghosts

tell him stories. “I’m glad he’s the kind of person that makes ghosts want to wait for him just to say thank you.”

“Ahhh, get outta here.” Narita brushes him off cheerfully. “Before you rot my nonexistent ghost teeth with that sap.”

Grinning, Izuku complies. Rei trails in his wake, leaving him to wrestle with the sudden unwanted image of Aizawa as one of his ghosts. It’s not a pleasant thought. On the walk to the cafeteria, Izuku thinks of the image, forcing it in front of his mind’s eye until it dulls the sting and he can finally brush it aside.

Aizawa’s a pro, anyway. If he’s been underground and successful for his whole career, then obviously he’s strong and he’s clever and Izuku’s just as lucky to be learning from him as he is to be learning from All-Might. Aizawa doesn’t need Izuku worrying about him.

Besides, tomorrow is Wednesday and there’s something big and exciting planned.

If rumors are true, it might even be a field trip.

Chapter End Notes

> CW: Discussions of past bullying, discussions of past murder and death by drowning.

Chapter 7

If Izuku had thought he could get away with it, he would have done a little dance of excitement. Only the second week of school, and already they're going on a field trip. His first field trip at Yuuei – and something tells him it will be different from the field trips he took throughout elementary and middle school. For one thing, they're only going as far as an off-campus school facility. For another, he's here to learn more hero skills instead of take a tour of the city or learn about history.

(And for a third, he has actual friends now, so his chances of getting ditched in a bathroom while his group sneaks off to laugh about it with the rest of the class are considerably smaller.)

His costume is still in tatters after the battle exercise, so Izuku gets into his gym uniform and dons his gloves, belt, and the new mouth guard he bought to replace the previous one. Rei whisks around him, admiring the odds and ends, and he holds out his hand and lets her inspect one of the gloves. Inwardly he's nearly vibrating with excitement. For the first time, they'll be taught jointly today by All-Might *and* Aizawa. It's always a joy learning from All-Might, and even Aizawa seems pretty okay with him ever since he narrowly avoided disaster on the first day of school. The thought is encouraging; after talking to Narita and Mrs. Kitayama yesterday, Izuku knows with little doubt that Aizawa's approval is something to strive for.

He makes his way outside, chatting with Uraraka. A chilly breath of air passes him by, and a familiar figure falls in step with him.

"Morning, half-pint."

Izuku blinks up at Ms. Shimura briefly. She's here, but All-Might isn't. It's not as rare to see that when they're at Yuuei, but it's still odd.

She must recognize the confusion on his face, because she shrugs and gives him a rueful look. "All-Might's gonna have to sit this one out. He ended up, uh, running a few too many errands this morning. His three hours are pretty much up, and it looks like Nedzu's gonna make sure he stays in the teacher's lounge instead of running off into more trouble. And I swear, that guy could talk villains to an early grave if he put his mind to it, so." She quirks a half-smile at him. "I think he's got his babysitter for the day, so I might as well tag along. I'm curious, you know?"

Izuku gives an almost imperceptible nod, but he can't help pulling a long face at the news. He'd really been looking forward to this joint class, too…

"Deku?" Uraraka's voice pulls his attention back to his living friend. "Something wrong? You kind of spaced out there." She follows the direction of his previous gaze, and stares straight at Ms. Shimura without seeing her.

"I'm fine. I, uh, thought I saw a bird or something."

She takes him at his word. Of course she does; she has no reason to believe that he would lie to her over something so small.

Less than a year ago, Izuku would have been overjoyed to be so easily believed, but now all he can feel is a sharp pang of guilt. For whatever reason, Uraraka trusts him unconditionally. She takes for granted that Izuku is worth trusting, that everything he says to her is true. It makes her so much easier to lie to than his bullying classmates throughout junior high.

Izuku has never felt so desperately uncomfortable with deceiving someone before. Maybe it's just because no one ever made it so easy by being his friend.

Under Iida's maximum-efficiency guidance, the class files onto the bus. Izuku passes close to Aizawa on his way in, and tries not to wince when Rei growls and tries to bite him when they get too close. Narita glares at her from where he stands at Aizawa's flank, but she ignores him.

"Wow," Ms. Shimura says dryly. "Your little friend there really knows how to hold a grudge."

Izuku dawdles while stepping onto the bus, mouth barely moving as he murmurs back. "Still hasn't forgiven him for the first day."

"Did you say something, Deku?" Uraraka looks over her shoulder.

"Just talking to myself," he lies again.

Before he has the chance to feel bad about it again, Kirishima gives his shoulder a friendly thump, and they get settled in their seats. "That's our Midoriya," Kirishima laughs. "I bet your hero name'll be the Mumbler."

Izuku flushes red when the others laugh, but it's not shame or hurt this time. They aren't laughing at his expense, or to look down on him, and Kirishima's teasing comment wasn't an insult; it was an honest-to-goodness joke. They're laughing *with* him, and Kirishima just called him "our" Midoriya. Like he's honestly one of them.

It's a lot to take in.

Everything here is backwards, he thinks. His classmates laugh with him, include him, talk to him, and treat him like someone worth befriending. Less than a week ago, when he ended up with three votes in the class rep election, they even seemed… genuinely happy for him? And now Kirishima's pulling him into a conversation, complimenting his quirk, and beaming when Izuku returns the favor, like Izuku's opinion is something that matters to him.

They *like* him. It's like they've mistaken him for someone cool.

"Bakugou's personality is pretty terrible," Tsuyu pipes up in the middle of a conversation. "I can't see him getting popular." Bakugou explodes, literally, while the others have a chuckle at his expense.

And now, the one getting teased and mocked is Bakugou.

"This is so weird," he mutters to Rei, who looks like she's having way too much fun watching.

"What's weird?" Tsuyu asks. Luckily, she keeps her voice down, and Bakugou's ranting is loud enough to keep anyone else from hearing their conversation.

"Uh, Bakugou," Izuku murmurs back. "Bakugou's getting bullied, and it's weird."

"It's all in fun," she says.

It's Bakugou, and that means Izuku has a few mental blocks about feeling sorry for him, but Tsuyu's specific words still turn his stomach, if only because he's heard them before, back when he was the one getting bullied. "Is it?"

"Sure." Tsuyu tilts her head. "We're not trying to put him down. He just makes it easy to rile him up. See? He's not hurt or anything."

And it's true; he's not. It's hard to imagine Bakugou with hurt feelings. And… everyone else seems to think so, too.

What they're doing isn't mean-spirited or cruel, the way it was for Izuku. Even when an eloquent, verbose comparison between Bakugou and "crap steeped in sewage" rolls effortlessly off of Kaminari's tongue, Izuku understands with a jolt that they aren't doing it to be mean.

"It's friendly teasing," Tsuyu says.

"Oh." Izuku watches as Bakugou pouts, and glares daggers at Kirishima when he tries to reach over and pat him on the shoulder. "I… didn't know you could do that."

He's not sure if Tsuyu hears him. Ms. Shimura does, if the odd look she sends his way is any indication. She doesn't question him, and neither does Tsuyu.

No, Izuku thinks as he sits on a bus, surrounded by living, breathing friends. This field trip is nothing like the ones he took in middle school.

Definitely nothing like them, he thinks as he tries not to work himself into an excited panic over meeting the Space Hero Thirteen.

Nothing like them, he thinks as he and his classmates gasp in awe and excitement over the Unforeseen Simulation Joint facility.

Nothing like them, he thinks as a black hole opens in the middle of the air, and spirits howl and scream as they pour through.

Izuku takes a step back, and Rei presses close and opens her jaws wide. Beside them, Ms. Shimura steps in front of Izuku, placing herself between him and the oncoming wave of ghosts. "What the *hell*—"

The howling mass pours forth from the black hole, scattering as they sob and shriek and wail.

Izuku looks to his friends. They're all staring curiously in the direction of the black hole, and only the black hole. No one looks afraid or alarmed, just curious.

The dead fly over their heads, and their howls form words.

"They're coming!"

"Run! Run or you're all dead!"

"Oh God… Oh God there are *children* here…"

“Get out of here!”

“Run!”

“They can’t hear us!”

Without thinking, Izuku steps forward. “What’s going on?” he calls, trying to get the attention of at least one of them.

He tries to take another step toward the portal and its ghosts, but a firm hand in front of his chest stops him. Rei lets out a growl. Aizawa has moved forward, placing himself between the students and the black hole. Thirteen is doing the same.

Aizawa speaks then, his voice almost lost beneath the cacophony of the dead. “Villains,” he says simply, and a moment later Izuku sees them emerge. They’re very much alive, formed into loose, disorganized ranks, and they’re stepping through the black hole like something out of a nightmare.

“Thirteen and Eraserhead,” a voice booms. “That’s odd. The schedule we received told us that Thirteen and *All-Might* were supposed to be teaching this class.”

“Where is he?” The unfamiliar voice cuts through the din so cleanly that for a moment Izuku is sure it can only be another ghost. But no—Izuku sees the ghosts turning, hears their voices quieting. They are all looking in the same direction, at the same person.

A man stands at the back of the villains, shoulders hunched, hands hanging loosely at his sides. At least, the hands that belong to him. There are many more pairs of hands, disembodied and pale, hanging from him as if part of a grotesque costume. On his arms, his ribs, around his neck as if strangling him. One hand covers his face like a mask.

“I went through all the trouble of bringing them,” the man with severed hands says. “And he’s not even here. Where is All-Might? They said he would be here.” His head tilts to the side. “I wonder if he’ll come if we kill some kids?”

A sharp intake of breath turns Izuku’s head, and his blood runs cold. Ms. Shimura was standing beside him before, but now she floats several meters back, standing stock-still as if… well, as if she’s seen a ghost. Her eyes are still blank and white, but the outline of her form wavers, and her face is a mask of frozen horror.

Her lips part, and her voice is so, so small. “No.” She’s shaking from head to toe. “No, no, he can’t have—”

Izuku edges closer to her, zeroing in on her so that all other voices fade into the background. “Ms. Shimura?” he says under his breath.

Her hand moves to cover her mouth, and she doesn’t answer.

“Everyone get back to the bus,” Aizawa says. The scarf ripples around him as he walks forward. He reaches for the goggles hanging around his neck. “Thirteen, start the evacuation. Try calling the school. If the sensors are out, then they may have someone with a radio-jamming quirk.”

“Ohhh man,” Narita murmurs, his voice tight with excitement. “You’re gonna see him cut loose now. This is gonna be so *cool*.”

“He’s outnumbered,” Izuku says under his breath. “His style is ambushing, erasing, and then capturing, not fighting a crowd by himself…”

With the ghosts’ screams burning in his ears, he misjudges how quietly he speaks. Aizawa glances over his shoulder and briefly meets his eyes. “Back to the bus, Midoriya,” he says, and slips the goggles into place.

“But-”

Without a backward glance, Aizawa launches himself off the top of the steps. Narita follows close behind, whooping in excitement. Izuku can only watch, frozen where he is, until Iida shouts at him to flee with the rest of the class.

Ms. Shimura is still standing at the edge of the steps, motionless as she watches the scene below. She only moves when Rei flies in her face, screaming and dragging at her until she lets herself be pulled along.

They almost make it to the doors. Rei shrieks as the same darkness that formed the black hole suddenly appears in their midst. It’s not just a black hole, or moving shadows; it’s a man made of darkness, with only a pair of glowing eyes and the vague impression of clothing to prove that he’s a person at all.

A warp quirk, some tiny little voice says in the back of Izuku’s mind. *That’s rare.*

The students are in a flurry of frantic energy. Most of them stay dutifully behind Thirteen. Others are frozen either in fear or confusion as the man made of darkness blocks the way and menaces them.

The Villain Alliance, he calls this group. Their purpose is to find All-Might, and kill him.

Ignoring their teacher's warnings, Bakugou and Kirishima charge forward to fight back. Izuku is too distracted to try to stop them, or join them. Ms. Shimura is in a panic; she flickers and flits about, as if she can barely keep herself together. Rei lets go of him to chase after her and try to corral her.

"Ms. Shimura," he whisper-shouts. His classmates are too distracted to notice or hear him, and he's too alarmed to care. "Ms. Shimura, *please*. What's wrong? Do you know what's going on?"

"Let go," she says, because Rei has her arms wrapped around her waist to keep her from blinking in and out of view. Her face is tight. "I need to go. I need to—" She stops short, casting a glance toward the fight in the center of the facility.

Izuku follows her gaze. His classmates are distracted, fighting off panic or focusing on the warp gates forming around them. They need to escape. "Who are they?" he asks. "Do you know them?"

A strangled sob cuts off whatever answer she might have given him. Izuku feels his heart clench in his chest. "I have to go," she tells him. "I have to find Toshi." Her wide, blank eyes turn to him, boring into him as tears gather. "I'll bring him—he'll help."

"But you said—and Aizawa and Thirteen, they were signaling each other. He's out of time." An explosion—one of Bakugou's—shakes the facility and sends up a cloud of thick smoke, and Izuku flinches and speaks through the ringing in his ears. "And he can't even see you anyway!"

"I know. I know. But I have to try. I have to try. I can't let this—I can't let him—" She breaks off, pressing the heels of her hands to her eyes before the tears can spill over. After a moment she lowers them and turns to Izuku, pale with desperate fear. She cups the side of his face with a hand that feels like ice.

He tries not to shiver at her touch. "Ms. Shimura," he whispers.

She rushes forward into an even colder hug. Her whisper brushes by

his ear, so softly that he shouldn't be able to hear it, but he does.

"*Don't die, little one. Don't let them kill you.*"

The breath catches in his throat. "I won't," he whispers back. "I have too much to do."

And then she's gone, and the darkness surrounds him like a blinding fog. He runs, but the ground no longer feels solid, and he barely makes it back to the light when he sinks into the pool of darkness with a cry of alarm. More ice-cold hands clutch at his, and he looks up to see Rei's face twisting and contorting with fear that borders on savagery. She clutches him so tightly that it hurts, but her form is weak and the pull of the warp gate is so much stronger.

"*Rei—*" His hands slip from hers. The last thing he sees before the warp swallows him whole is his friend's nightmare of a face, jaws opening wide to give vent to her fury.

Little Brother is afraid.

I know this because I see it in his eyes, and I hear it in his breath, and I smell it on him. He is rank with it.

That's not good. Little Brother is ***never*** *afraid, not unless the bully comes too close to him. He wasn't even afraid of* ***me****, when I first found him back when he was still little, even littler than me. He's not so little now but he is still my Little Brother because I will protect him, I will watch him, and if anything tries to hurt him I will tear it to shreds and break it to pieces because he is mine, mine, mine.*

But he is afraid now, and I am also afraid, because the darkness is here and it's not my *darkness, it's not the same, it's someone else's. It belongs to someone who wants to hurt him and I won't let them, I won't let them.*

But it is too fast, and I am dead and I have been dead for so, so long, and I cannot remember being anything else. I cannot touch this dark, I cannot stop it as it surrounds Little Brother and he starts to fall.

I catch his hand in both of mine, and I scream and I want to cry and he looks at me with big, big eyes and he is a f r a i d.

The darkness takes him. It takes him and swallows him whole and he is gone, gone, gone and I cannot find him in the dark.

There are many people here, big people, living people, surrounded by those who are dead. They are killers, they spread death and death follows them. They came and brought dead things with them, and they brought the darkness that stole him away.

They TOOK him.

They took Little Brother they hurt him they took him away and it's NOT FAIR and they aren't allowed to take what isn't theirs.

*He is MINE. **I** found him. **I** picked him. He talks to me and he gave me a name and he isn't yours, he's mine, mine, MINE.*

GIVE HIM BACK.

GIVE HIM BACK OR YOU'LL BE SORRY.

HE'S NOT YOURS.

*HE IS **MINE**. **MY** LITTLE BROTHER. **MY** FRIEND.*

MINE.

Izuku would probably be dead without Asui—either drowned, or bitten and left to bleed out in the water. But his classmate's powerful kick sends the shark-faced villain flying underwater, before her tongue wraps around his chest she tows him back to the surface. Coughing and spluttering, Izuku scrambles to be more helpful than a dead weight as Asui lifts both him and a dripping Mineta to the momentary safety of the boat.

The first thing he hears when his ears are cleared of water is the screaming. He can't even discern the voice that's responsible, because it doesn't sound like a voice at all. There is an almost physical weight to the noise, and it keeps him crouched low to the deck of the boat, clenching his teeth as it rings painfully in his skull. Is this someone's quirk? Does one of the villains have a vocal power the way Present Mic does? Tears gather in his eyes as his head aches, but thankfully he's too soaking wet for anyone to notice.

"H-hey," Mineta says, prodding at him worriedly. "Midoriya, you're not hurt, are you? What's the matter?"

"Do we know who's doing all the screaming?" he manages to gasp out. How can they stand it? Asui doesn't even seem bothered by the noise

at all.

Mineta cocks his head, confused. “What screaming?”

Closer to the railing, Asui tilts her head this way and that. “I think I hear it, a little. You must have really good ears, Midoriya.” She croaks worriedly. “It might be some of our classmates. That villain had warp powers—he must have scattered us all over the facility. I hope they’re all right.”

Izuku forces himself to his feet, swaying a little as the painful noise pervades his bones and vibrates the very marrow at their core. Asui and Mineta are talking to each other, unaffected. They don’t hear it, he realizes dimly. And that can only mean one thing: whoever is doing it is dead.

He makes it to the railing and leans there, focusing his eyes on the scene around them. The warp villain has dropped them in the flood simulation zone; all around, the water surface ripples as various aquatic villains close in on the boat. And beyond that, toward the central plaza of the facility…

Bile rises in his throat, and his breath hitches. “*Rei.*”

Across the water, in the distance, there is another black hole, far different and far more familiar than the warp villain’s portals. At least the warp gates had some semblance of order and control. This darkness lashes and roils, shifting and heaving like it’s alive. Like it’s *angry*.

Her threat displays whenever Bakugou comes near cannot compare to this. Her temper tantrum after Aizawa erased his quirk cannot come close.

He’s seen this before. Perhaps not at this scale, but he’s seen it. Rei is angry. She is terrified. And if he doesn’t get to her, she might get angry and terrified enough to hurt someone.

“Mineta,” he hears Tsuyu say. “Don’t you think, if they put together this whole plan to kill All-Might, then it’s probably because they have a way to do it?”

Kill All-Might. Why would they do that? Because he’s the Number One? Is it for renown? Or is it to get rid of the main deterrent against crime?

Rei's screams reach a fever pitch, and he shakes himself. There's no time to worry about that anyway; besides, they're out to kill the man that Izuku has looked up to since before he could read, the very man who gave him his one chance to achieve his lifelong dream. The "why" doesn't matter. "We have to get over there," he says, gripping the railing until his knuckles are white. "We have to help them." He glares fiercely at his classmates. "And if they want to kill All-Might, then we have to do everything we can to make sure they fail."

Asui—Tsuyu, rather—balks, and Mineta panics, but Izuku's mind is more than made up. In his mind, he's already on the other side of the water, finding Rei in the midst of all that darkness, calming her and bringing her back. She's afraid. She needs him. She needs to know he's okay.

Their only advantage is surprise, and what they can assume is a lack of knowledge on the part of the villains. It will have to be enough. The three of them compare quirks, Izuku fighting to block out Rei's cries so that he can hear them. He eyes the villains, and the beginnings of a strategy knit themselves together in his head.

In a matter of moments, he throws a plan together. He'll have to sacrifice a couple of fingers; there's no getting around that. But it's only two fingers. He's seen ghosts with missing limbs, half-severed heads and slashed throats. He can make it through this with only eight.

He launches himself from the boat, and with one flick he shatters the bones in his thumb and third finger, and sends a shock wave of force straight at the surface of the water. The villains go tumbling helplessly as the water surface rapidly spreads apart from the point of impact; those that aren't knocked out by the initial strike are left flailing in the current and fighting just to keep their heads above the water. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he yells for his classmates. Tsuyu performs a spectacular leap and catches him around the waist with her tongue. Hanging from her arms, Mineta screams in fear and defiance and hurls sticky balls into the water until blood runs down his face.

The water converges again, bringing villains and sticky orbs with it. In a matter of moments, the menacing force is trapped in a struggling pile, stuck fast to each other as they bob in the still heaving water. Tsuyu carries them clear of the villains. They hit the surface at a safe distance and swim the rest of the way to shore.

"So what do we do?" Tsuyu asks, as they approach the edge of the

water. “I mean—Midoriya, we’re just students. What can we do against all these villains?”

“Whatever we can,” Izuku says distractedly. “Look, you don’t have to come with me, there’s just something I need to do.”

“You’re *crazy*,” Mineta mutters, clinging to Tsuyu with a bit more enthusiasm than their current situation really warrants.

Tsuyu hesitates. She doesn’t quite frown; her mouth isn’t really shaped for frowning. But her brow furrows thoughtfully. “I’ll come with you,” she says. “You’re the one with the plan, Midoriya.”

Izuku bites his lip. He doesn’t have much of a plan now. He’s surrounded by armed villains and screaming, howling ghosts. The presence of the latter pounds a single cold, hard fact into him: these aren’t just criminals he’s dealing with. These are killers, cutthroats, and murderers all. They’re here to kill All-Might, they’re here to kill his classmates if it means drawing All-Might out, and if Izuku is too slow, too weak, or too hesitant, then they’ll kill him too.

He’d rather not die today, if he can avoid it. Ms. Shimura asked him not to, and besides, he has far too much to do.

“I don’t have a plan,” he says.

“You got us out of that,” Tsuyu points out, jerking her head back at the ruined boat in the shipwreck zone.

Rei’s screaming presses against his brain, squeezing the heart in his chest. The darkness lashes; he can’t see where she is, and he can barely see the fighting that’s still going on among all these villains.

He looks back and meets Tsuyu’s eyes, stares at her long and hard until she blinks first. “Tsuyu,” he says quietly, so quietly that he can barely hear his own voice over his friend’s hideous cries. “Don’t follow me.”

Turning, Izuku runs straight toward the battling villains, straight into the thrashing darkness that only he can see.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Izuku knows he must look strange, if Tsuyu and Mineta are watching him run. He zigzags instead of running in a straight line, weaving his way through the crowd of wailing dead. It's not as if he can help it. He doesn't just see and hear ghosts; he feels them too, and that means he can't simply walk straight through them the way everyone else can.

As he darts toward the central plaza, he can't help but notice that the ghosts are moving in the opposite direction that he is. They cast fearful glances back at it, at the thrashing darkness that marks where Rei is. She frightens them; they're all dead and murdered, and she frightens them.

It's a jolt when he sees a familiar face among the pale, bloodied, washed-out figures. Narita meets him before he can quite reach the plaza. His form is wavering, blinking in and out of view in the way that ghosts do when they're agitated. Izuku skids to a halt, and Narita nearly crashes into him. Cold, dead hands grip his shoulders, chilling him through the fabric of his gym uniform.

"Make her *stop*." Blood runs freely down his face, pouring from the wound in his head. Even without visible eyes, he looks desperate. "Please, Midoriya, you've got to make her stop—I can't reach her, and she's so *angry*—" Rei's screaming leaps in pitch, and he flinches as if it's a physical blow. "And it's *hurting him*."

"What?" Izuku's breath catches in his chest. Other ghosts are staring, astonished. None of them realized that he can see them, and now here he is getting gripped and shaken by one of their own.

"Eraserhead." The deathly cold grip tightens. "She's crazy enough that he's feeling it, and it's throwing him off. I've never seen him flinch this much in a fight, and he stumbles every time she touches him." Blood runs into his eyes, turning his glare red. "Make her stop, Midoriya. Make her stop or he's going to join us and I won't forgive you for bringing her to him."

"Where is she?" Izuku asks, heart pounding in his chest. "I'll get her out, I promise—she's just scared, she thinks I'm in trouble—tell me

where she is. Is she moving around a lot?"

"No." Narita turns, letting go of him to point. "There, she's on the side of the fight, where that pile of downed villains are. She's been tearing at them this whole time. She only moves if the fight gets close enough. I don't think she even knows what she's doing at this point."

Izuku squints, but he can't see her.

"Where the darkness is thickest," Narita says. "That's where she'll be."

And Izuku sees it. He doesn't see Rei, but he does see what Narita is saying. Luck is with him; the epicenter of Rei's black hole isn't in the thick of the fighting. It's going to be dangerous, and it's going to be stupid, and two of his fingers are limp and useless, but if he skirts around the battle and doesn't screw up, he can do it. He can reach her.

"No, what are you—are you crazy?" Another ghost, a middle-aged man with his head hanging at an odd angle. "Don't send him in there!" He turns to Izuku. "Haven't you been paying attention? They'll kill you!"

"Shut up!" Narita snaps. "He's the only one that can get that poltergeist out of there!"

"I won't die," Izuku whispers, half to himself. He can't stand here much longer; he's out in the open, and if he lingers then some villain is bound to take advantage of an easy target. "I can do this. I won't die. I won't die."

"Who are you talking to?"

Izuku jumps, whipping around to see Tsuyu standing behind him. Mineta is nowhere to be seen.
"Where's—"

"He ran toward the entrance," she says. "It's for the best—he can't run as fast on his own, and if I'm going to follow you, I can't have him hanging off of me." She turns her head, scanning the scene beyond him. "I don't know what you're trying to do, Midoriya," she says. "But if we stay out here much longer, they'll see us."

"I told you not to follow me," he almost hisses. It isn't just nobility driving him to say that, though his main fear is that he'll lead her into injury and mortal danger. But a smaller fear is that she'll see him talk

to ghosts, or otherwise act in ways that he won't be able to explain.

"Well I didn't listen," she says. "So what's your plan?"

"I'm not going to get in Aizawa's way," Izuku says. "I'm just going to —to see if there's anything I can do to lighten his load." It's not a lie, what he tells her. That is very much what he's going to do. "Listen, I'm aiming for the other side of the plaza. There's some serious stuff going on at the entrance still, so we can't go that way. But if we find a quieter place to catch our breath, then so much the better, right?"

"Are you trying to help Aizawa-sensei, or get somewhere safe?" Tsuyu asks.

"Both. If you have to follow me, then meet me there, okay?"

He doesn't wait for an answer; if she's determined to follow him, then there's no way he can convince her not to. Izuku turns wide, gives Aizawa's battle a generous berth, and runs like he has never run before. More than anything, he wants to call out to Rei, to let her know as soon as possible that he's alive and almost unhurt. But if he does, then the villains will hear him, and he won't be alive for very long after that.

Something is very, very wrong.

Aizawa Shouta has been acutely aware of this ever since the damned warping villain scattered his students across the USJ facility. Instincts scream at him to help them, to gather them up and get them to safety, but he cannot follow those feelings even though he wants to. He's surrounded, hemmed in, and outnumbered. All he's capable of right now is subduing as many villains as possible, and keeping the bulk of the fighting and the strongest members of their forces here in the plaza, instead of running off into the facility to go after the students.

His students.

At first, he had mistaken it for simple alarm, the natural dread that he should feel when seeing the children under his charge in danger. But even now, as the battle goes on and adrenaline rushes through his veins, the fear does not fade as it normally does. As it always does. If anything, it escalates with every passing minute.

The feeling chokes him, squeezing the very heart in his chest until he's sure his pulse will stop altogether. His reaction time suffers for it; he

has narrowly missed death more individual times in this single fight than he has in his past year of hero work. And every now and then, chills grip him, the feeling of someone walking over his grave. If they are sudden enough, then they force him to blink, and his quirk-erasing hold fails on whatever villain he looks at. He's disoriented, bleeding, and unable to breathe properly.

He leaps back and takes a deep breath to try to calm himself and get his rampaging terror under control. The breath makes noise, a quiet inward wheeze as he forces air into his lungs.

This… isn't right.

No—this isn't right, he realizes. This fear isn't natural. It doesn't feel the way he knows his fear ought to feel. It feels more like someone has plunged deep into his brain, shredded apart consciousness and subconscious, and slammed their fist down on the button marked "Terror".

An emotion-enhancing quirk? He's heard of those; they tend to go hand-in-hand with standard empathy. He switches his gaze from one villain to another, trying to find who is responsible, but the gut-churning terror that grips him refuses to fade.

He looks to the ringleader—the pale one in black, whose face is masked by a severed hand. That one has yet to reveal his quirk. Perhaps it's him?

…No. But who else could it be? Is there another villain on the sidelines, sabotaging him from a safe distance?

He looks. He does not find a villain, but he catches a glimpse of movement. Quick, almost unnoticeable movement.

The fear within him wrenches at his insides—that's Midoriya Izuku, the boy he almost failed on the first day, skirting the edge of the fighting like a fool. What does he think he's doing?

Shouta makes sure to keep his face turned away from Midoriya as he fights. If the boy is going to be an idiot, then Shouta can't afford to give away his presence by looking at him. He tracks Midoriya's progress from the corner of his eye. To his credit, the boy is fast, and he's using what little cover there is to his advantage. If Shouta weren't occupied by being hopelessly outnumbered and artificially scared out of his wits, he might even spare a moment for approval. He settles for relief; it cushions him against the fear, somewhat.

Midoriya ducks out of his line of vision then, and Shouta is too busy dodging a flurry of blows from another villain to keep watching. His scarf wraps around his attacker, and he flings the villain straight into the path of another in mid-pounce. With a meaty thud, they both go down, and Shouta is reeling with terror again and—

All at once, the stranglehold around his heart falls away. Shouta can breathe again, and does so with enough quiet desperation to leave him nearly gasping.

Before he can stop himself, he looks back to find Midoriya not far off, running full pelt away from a group of unconscious villains left in a heap after Shouta had subdued them, toward the beginning of the fight. He could kick himself in irritation. He hadn't thought to look for the culprit among the villains he had already defeated. One of them must have recovered enough to sabotage him from the sidelines. The lot of them are still lying motionless on the ground, with Midoriya racing away, holding his arm out oddly.

His student looks back, and meets his eyes for only a moment. From the distance, and through his eye-concealing goggles, Shouta catches the flash of desperate hope in his student's eyes.

He's not sure what Midoriya has done. By the time the day is over he won't have the chance to wonder, or to scold the boy for his recklessness. But at least, in this moment, he can spare a moment of gratitude before he turns back to the villains, and finds the ringleader charging at him to attack for the first time.

Izuku's heart is in his throat as he tears past the battlefield, plunging in an out of the blackness. He sees the darkest point just ahead, hovering in the midst of a heap of unconscious, motionless villains. Other villains battle around him, from the low-level thugs to the hulking, muscular brute with dark blue skin and unblinking eyes. Rei's darkness lashes at him, chilling him to the bone marrow, but he keeps his feet moving and hurls himself straight into where the shadows are thickest.

He feels her more than he sees her, a floating cold spot in the heart of the black hole. Izuku reaches out, and his fingers brush something that burns like dry ice. He wraps his arms around a familiar small form, and when he breaks through the other side of the darkness, he takes her with him.

She struggles in his arms, clawing at him, lashing out with pure rage.

“Rei,” he whispers. “Rei, it’s me.”

He looks back. The blackness is already scattering, giving him a better view of the battle. He searches it briefly, and finds Aizawa looking in his direction. With the goggles it’s impossible to tell if he’s looking at Izuku.

Izuku skids to a halt some distance from the edge of the fighting, nearly losing his balance. He falls to a kneeling position, clutching Rei with both arms to make sure she doesn’t get loose and go back to her raging.

She’s still struggling. Izuku crouches low and clings to her. “Rei. Rei, stop,” he whispers. “It’s okay. It’s me. I’m sorry—I didn’t mean to scare you like that.” The struggles weaken, and she finally goes limp and cold in his arms. When he feels small, frigid hands clutching at his arm, he finally looks down at her.

Black eyes stare back, wide and terrible with fear.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers. “It’s okay. It’s gonna be okay, I promise.”

She twists around in his arms and hugs him, burying her face into his chest. The screaming has finally stopped. His friend is silent.

“Midoriya!”

He looks up to find Tsuyu catching up, keeping low to the ground as she darts along. “Tsuyu?”

“Are you okay?” Tsuyu whispers, dropping down beside him. There’s some scant cover here, but not much.

“Fine,” he says tightly. He watches the fight. To anyone who doesn’t see what he does, Aizawa seems to have gained his second wind. He doesn’t stumble or pause as he fights, and Rei’s darkness has vanished so that Izuku can clearly see the whole scene. Narita is back, watching the fight and following Aizawa’s every move. For the first time, Izuku feels the knot in his chest loosen as he just dares to hope. “I think… I think it’s going to be okay. We have a chance now.”

And then, across the way, the man who wears severed hands reaches out and catches Aizawa’s elbow before it can strike him. As Izuku watches, aghast, the black sleeve of Aizawa’s costume crumbles, and the arm beneath it begins to crumble as well before Aizawa breaks free. Rei, raising her head to watch, lets out a low hiss.

“What kind of quirk is that?” Tsuyu whispers, horrified.

Izuku hushes her. “It’s not over yet,” he murmurs desperately. “It’s not over, he’s just hurt, he can still—”

He doesn’t see the hulking dark one move until it’s already on top of Aizawa. It’s fast—far faster than a person that size has any right to be. Their teacher turns to look at it, and has to bend his head back just to look at the face—the misshapen, deformed mess of a face, with its exposed brain and rolling, unblinking eyes.

The brute brings its upraised hand down, and the fight is over before Izuku can blink. Before his eyes, Aizawa’s shattered goggles go flying, and his teacher’s blood spatters the ground. The tide has turned so quickly that Izuku feels sick with vertigo, and he can only watch in helpless horror as his teacher takes the most brutal beating that Izuku has ever witnessed.

A strangled noise escapes him. He doesn’t think—his mind is burned blank with panic. All he sees is Tsuyu horrified beside him, Narita screaming his head off as he hurls his intangible form at the monster, Aizawa limp and broken on the ground—*Aizawa pale and washed out and bloodied, standing before him with blank white eyes, just one more ghost for Izuku to talk to*.

Even when the beating stops, it doesn’t, not really. The monster—Noumu, Izuku hears the pale villain call it Noumu—pins him down, breaking and crushing his arms until Aizawa cries out with pain. Narita’s scream joins it.

He moves, because in that moment rushing in to certain death is less terrifying to him than cowering and doing nothing as another ghost is made in front of him. His body moves, and he doesn’t think. With Rei following at his side, he ignores his classmates’ warnings and runs.

He makes no sound. The lower-level thugs are either out of commission or watching the beating, the Noumu is busy with Aizawa, and the pale villain’s back is to him. Rei is with him, and she is *eager*. She wants to hurt them, she wants to terrify them, she wants to *make them pay*, and the power of her fervor gives him speed. Izuku’s hand curls into a fist, and he calls on One For All as he lunges at the pale villain’s unprotected back.

Sorry, Aizawa-sensei, he thinks. *It looks like I’m going to have to cripple myself this time.*

He doesn't want to watch Aizawa become a ghost. He doesn't want him to talk to Narita and Mrs. Kitayama yet. He wants Aizawa to make them wait longer, as long as possible. It can't be his time yet, it *can't.*

He pulls his arm back, rippling with One For All. He may break his bones again, but if he can take out the leader in the process, then it will be worth it.

At the last moment, the pale villain turns to face him, eyes sparking with a wild, joyful light. At precisely the same moment, Tsuyu's tongue wraps around his chest with a wet smack and yanks him back out of the villain's reach, just as one of his pale, bloodless hands lashes out at him. Izuku loses his hold on One For all, and the sparking energy dissipates.

"Oh." The pale villain's voice trembles with glee. "What's this? Did you want to join him?"

Rei shrieks, and her rage seeps into Izuku's skin. He forces himself blank, just to keep from spitting with fury. Tsuyu drags him farther back, away from the man who wears severed hands. Her tongue releases him, and she dashes forward to catch his arm and drag him back with her full weight.

"Sorry, Midoriya," she murmurs. "But if I let you get yourself killed, I couldn't forgive myself."

Izuku clenches his teeth until his jaw creaks. He looks from the pale villain to where Narita huddles by Aizawa's prone form, and his eyes burn. "You shouldn't have—"

Narita's bloodstained face turns to Izuku, and his jaws open wide to scream again. "***RUN!***"

This time it's Izuku who catches Tsuyu by the arm and drags her back until she starts running too. Narita's warning only offers them a split second's head start, and it's not enough; the pale villain is already upon them.

A grating scream drives like nails into his skull as Rei throws herself between them. But the villain's hand plunges straight through her, and Izuku can barely get his arms up to shield himself from the villain's quirk.

One of the villain's hands closes around around his wrist. The other

catches Tsuyu by the back of her neck. Rei howls, finger-claws dragging at the villain's hidden face. Izuku stares, transfixed, and waits for the pain to come.

It doesn't.

They wait on bated breath, frozen with fear, the villain unreadable as he watches their skin fail to crumble and flake off like old paint.

The villain seems to sigh. "Damn," he says, and his grip loosens as he looks over his shoulder. Izuku follows his gaze, all the way back to where Aizawa lies broken on the ground, head raised, eyes glowing red and suffused with blood as he keeps them fixed on the pale villain. "That was pretty cool, Eraserhead."

The Noumu smashes Aizawa's head into the concrete with a sickening thud. Blood spreads across the ground, and Aizawa never makes a sound.

The pale villain's grip has loosened, enough for them to break free before his quirk can reactivate. They only have a few seconds before he notices and attacks again, but for Izuku, those moments stretch to a miniature eternity.

He doesn't look at Tsuyu, tense with fear beside him. He doesn't even look at the pale villain, dressed in black and draped in severed hands. He looks past him, to where his teacher lies still and silent on the ground. To where, slowly, a form flickers into view—transparent, weak, and wavering, like an image with bad reception—beside the body and the Noumu and the silent Narita.

Aizawa stands next to his own body, pale, ragged, and blood-streaked, his form faded and transparent but very much visible.

A scream fills Izuku from toe to tip, threatening to rip itself free, but he keeps his mouth pressed shut, and instead it floods through his veins like pounding adrenaline. He tears his eyes from the apparition and turns them to the villain who caused it, and he has never, ever wished to make a ghost before but in this moment he understands why some people do.

Darkness gathers not far from where they stand, and Rei shrieks in fury as the warp villain appears in their midst. The pale villain straightens up at the sight of him.

"Kurogiri," he says. "Did you kill Thirteen?"

The distance is not great enough to keep Izuku from hearing the villain's cold, rumbling voice. "No, Shigaraki Tomura," he says. "I put Thirteen out of commission, but one of the students escaped the facility." The glowing eyes narrow. "Once he's out of range of our signal jammer, he'll soon be able to call the school for help."

The hope rises in Izuku's chest, but he stamps on it viciously. No—he already made the mistake of getting hopeful before. He won't make it again.

As he watches, the pale ringleader flies into a quiet rage, clawing at the sides of his neck where the disembodies hands don't cover. He mutters half to himself, snarling threats at his comrade, and Izuku can hear the way the villain's voice hitches and cracks.

And then, as suddenly as it started, the tirade stops. Slowly his hands sink to his sides, leaving angry red scratches on his own neck. "It's no use," he says calmly, as if he wasn't ranting and spitting just seconds ago. "We can't fight dozens of pros. So it's game over for now. Yes…" His hands shake and flex at his sides. "Let's go home. But first…"

He looks back at them, fingers curling as if he imagines wringing their necks, and Izuku feels his mingled terror and rage rising within him as he takes in the pale, bloodless villain. It fills him from his stomach to his heart to his lungs, drowning him. The villain steps up to him again, fingers twitching eagerly, and the thoughts flee from Izuku's head.

And so, with no thoughts to distract him, it's the force of habit and pure instinct that makes him breathe in, and out, again and again until the storm ebbs and flows away again. Slowly, as he watches the villain's hidden face—*pale, washed out, not so different from a ghost*—the flood drains away on its own and leaves a silent fog of blank numbness in its wake.

Rei's distorted form writhes within his line of vision, as she snarls like a beast that crawled from the depths of some dark pit. A stone's throw away, Narita stands with Aizawa's spirit, both of them faded and bloodied. As Izuku watches, Narita's pale hand—solid in his vision—reaches out to Aizawa's translucent figure, and passes through it in the same way the living pass through the dead. The same way Izuku cannot.

What enters his mind then is not hope, but merely an idea, neither happy nor sad, that clears his head. What he sees of Aizawa is

different from what he's seen of other ghosts. His ghost is nearly but not quite there. Perhaps that means he is nearly but not quite dead.

All around the facility, the dead pass through. Broken, mangled, with no bodies to breathe and no hearts to beat, they wail and weep and follow their murderers and wait, always patient, for their time of reckoning.

Izuku lifts his eyes to the villain's, and breathes out again.

My friends are scarier than you.

Chapter End Notes

CW violence, potentially fatal head injury.

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

> I was gonna wait before posting this chapter but then I thought, hell with it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He's free.

The crushing weight of the Noumu is gone, and Shouta is free and the pain is gone and his head is clear but for the roaring in his ears, and he's not sure how this happened but he can't afford to care.

He broke eye contact. That villain, the one with the disintegrating touch—Midoriya was there, and Asui Tsuyu—they were there, right there, and the villain was on top of them and *he broke eye contact*

His eyes clear. He's looking at the villain's back, just across the way. The pale man hasn't moved from where he was before, standing over the kids—they're children—they're *his kids, his students*—and Shouta moves before he can properly think. He reaches them far more swiftly than he has ever moved before—*he blinks, he just blinks and he's there* —and yells at them to run. He can still move, he can still fight, he can still protect them until he can't move or fight anymore.

Not one head turns to look at him.

The villain ignores him, still talking to the one with the warp quirk. Shouta stands between the man and his students in far too little space, and no one backs away. He looks over his shoulder and finds Asui speechless with horror as she stares not at him but through him, while Midoriya's eyes are glassy and blank as if he feels too much for any of it to show.

"Hey. Hey, you need to cool it before you go crazy."

He doesn't hear anyone come up, he just hears the voice. A young voice, belonging to another kid, but this is not a face he recognizes. This one is older than his students, pale and blood-streaked with wide eyes.

Wide, blank, dead-white eyes.

Shouta blinks, and finally he looks, and he sees.

The facility is crowded with people. Pale, spectral figures, too many to count. The closest one is a little girl, dark-haired and dressed in white. She watches him silently, one among countless others. Most of them mangled, disfigured, and crying out as the villains ignore them.

No—that isn't right. They don't ignore them.

They just don't see them at all.

Shouta looks down, and sees the ground through his own hands.

"No," he whispers. "No, no, no-no-no--"

"Hey!" It's the boy again, the one who bleeds from a hole in his head (and that's familiar, he recognizes that, he knows what it means but the memory is just beyond his reach) and watches him in quiet awe and horror. "Look, you—you need to calm down, it's not—

But Shouta stops listening, because that's when he looks back the way he had come, back to where the Noumu still crouches as it keeps guard over…

As it

holds down

He throws a punch at the man standing before him, vicious in his desperation, and the blow passes through him as if Shouta's fist is made of fog. He spits a curse that none of them can hear.

"*Eraserhead*." The boy he doesn't know tries to catch hold of him to stop him, but he can't touch Shouta either. "Look, you're not—if it helps, I don't think you're totally dead, just… almost."

"It *doesn't matter*." Shouta's words are nearly a snarl, and they sound far away even to his own ears. "I can't just lie down and let them do this!"

"You don't have a choice. If we had a choice, I'd've stopped them from doing this to *you*. I'm sorry." The boy meets his fury and frustration with sadness and pity, and Shouta doesn't need pity, he doesn't *want* pity—

Something warm curls against his wrist.

It's only because he feels something warm that he realizes with a jolt that he feels nothing when he is like this. No pain, no temperature, not even the ground that should be beneath his feet. He feels nothing, and that is why he notices when he feels something warm.

He looks back.

Midoriya stares straight ahead as his fingers curl around Shouta's wrist, not quite touching him—he can't touch him—but trying. Approximating.

His student's voice is so quiet that he barely hears the words.

"It's okay," Midoriya's eyes are wide and unblinking as he whispers. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." Tears gather in his eyes. "It's going to be okay. Nobody has to die here."

Midoriya raises his wet, shining eyes, and meets Shouta's.

"What was that?" The sound of the villain's voice curls in the air like oily smoke. "Nobody has to die?" His voice shakes with held-back laughter. "Well that's not really up to you, is it?"

Midoriya doesn't take his eyes away from Shouta's face, but when he speaks again, his voice rings cold and clear. "I wasn't talking to you."

Shouta doesn't know what's happening. He doesn't understand any of this; none of it makes sense to him, except the fact that his student is mouthing off to a villain instead of running away, and that's going to get him killed. "What are you doing?" Shouta hisses. He tries to shove Midoriya away, but it's no use. "Get out of here and *run*."

"They wouldn't get far," the young ghost tells him. "That one's fast, and that one warps. They'd be caught in seconds." Shouta looks sharply at him, and the boy shrugs. "I'm *just saying*."

Behind him the villain speaks again, voice dripping with quiet menace. "What… did you just say…?"

Midoriya's eyes shift then, moving from Shouta's face to the villain standing behind him. "I said," Midoriya answers patiently. "I wasn't talking to you." His head tilts to one side, blinking slowly as he considers the pale villain before him. "But, since you're asking… would you like to talk?"

“Midoriya, what are you *doing?*” Shouta would drag him away if he could, by the hair if need be, but his reaching hands pass through his student uselessly. Midoriya doesn’t react beyond briefly closing his eyes. “Run, you idiot!” There’s a hiss not unlike radio static, and the little girl in white rushes at him with a face that drips and melts into a snarl. He pulls back on instinct, and Midoriya stands before the villain unobstructed.

Midoriya’s eyes briefly meet his, then flicker past him to look at the villain once more. Shouta has never felt so helpless in his life.

The man who wears severed hands stares back. His eyes glitter through the cracks in the fingers.

“If you’re going to kill him, then do it quickly,” the warp villain rumbles urgently.

“It’s… Shigaraki?” Midoriya says. “Is that what he called you?” There’s no reply. “Sorry to interrupt, I was just wondering. Does this mean you’re still going to leave?” For all the tension and terror that Shouta feels sharply, he still has just enough room to approve of the sheer force of Midoriya’s composure. It’s impressive, given the circumstances—eerie, but impressive. And yet, that very same composure gives him pause, because it doesn’t belong on that face. It *shouldn’t* belong. Where is the boy who stammers and shakes in the face of a challenge? Where is the boy who rallies with a determined smile?

Midoriya… isn’t smiling right now. He isn’t anything. His face is as blank as a doll’s.

“Maybe.” The villain lifts one of his own hands again. “Not that you’ll be alive to see it.”

“Oh.” Midoriya doesn’t step back, but he does lean back, pressing into Asui and pushing her further away from the villain before him, as well. “You’re still going to kill us, too?” He asks so bluntly, so casually, as if the thought of death doesn’t make him panic; it simply makes him cold.

“Wouldn’t that be nice?” Shigaraki’s eyes shine with excitement. “If we can’t kill All-Might here, then we may as well hurt his pride instead.” The hand covers most of his face, but Shouta can practically hear the grin.

“Oh, well if that’s what you want to do,” Midoriya says. Shouta sees

the way he eyes Shigaraki's lethal hands. "I think you've already done it, plenty. And I don't know what your plan is, but so far it seems pretty effective."

This gives the villain pause. He cocks his head, almost birdlike in his curiosity. "…Oh?"

"Shigaraki Tomura," the warp villain growls. "Why are you wasting time speaking with this child?"

"Well yes," Midoriya replies, ignoring him. He speaks slowly, unhurriedly, as if they're chatting out on the street. "I mean, you don't really need to kill us if you want to hurt All-Might's pride. I think you already did that just breaking in here at all." His eyes flicker briefly to Shouta again. One eye twitches, but it's not a twitch—it's a wink, on the side that Shigaraki can't see as well. "And, I don't know if you know this, but… Aizawa-sensei and All-Might don't really like each other very much. So it's already going to hurt his pride that Eraserhead did all the work and gets all the glory for fighting you by himself." That's a lie, Shouta knows. All-Might isn't that petty, and someone who admires him as much as Midoriya does would damn well *know* that he isn't that petty. He sees Midoriya's throat bob a little as he swallows. "And that All-Might didn't even show up when you beat him up. He's not going to be very proud about that."

"Ohh." There's an excited tremble in Shigaraki's voice—*he's buying it, he's actually listening*. "I didn't know that. I didn't think of that. That's very interesting… what was your name?"

"Oh I'm just… some guy," Midoriya says. "So, I mean… I don't think anyone's going to think less of you if you leave now. You've already done a lot, breaking in here, and beating Eraserhead, so it's pretty impressive. Except…"

"Except what?" Shigaraki leans closer. Shouta can smell the chemical preservatives keeping the severed hands from decomposing, and judging by the way Midoriya's nose wrinkles, so can he. The villain's fingers dance closer to Midoriya's face, not quite touching him, just… reminding him. Midoriya blinks, but not much else. "Do go on. You're a bold, funny little thing, aren't you?"

"Can you really kill All-Might?" Midoriya asks, his voice blandly curious. "He's the strongest, you know. I don't know if anyone can kill him."

"He's stalling," the young ghost whispers, as if there's any chance of

the villains overhearing. The ghost's voice trembles with excitement. "Holy shit, he's buying time, fucking *go for it*, Midoriya."

"Be *careful*." Shouta keeps his voice soft, too. If he startles Midoriya, then Midoriya might startle the villains, or otherwise lose this tenuous hold he has over Shigaraki. It is *fragile*. The entire situation is fragile, and if his student isn't careful then he's going to get all of them killed.

The villain's voice trembles with amusement at Midoriya's question. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Shigaraki…" the warp villain warns, and is ignored.

"So you must have something big planned, if you're here to kill All-Might," Midoriya says. His voice sounds alien to Shouta's ears, far away and unnaturally steady. "You must have something big up your sleeve, something you *know* will kill him. Otherwise you wouldn't have gone to all this trouble, right? You got so far, and you beat Aizawa-sensei and Thirteen, so you must be smart."

"Shigaraki!" the warp villain snaps.

"Shut up, Kurogiri," Shigaraki spits back petulantly. "He's going to die anyway. You are," he adds with a glance at Izuku. "And we *can* kill the Symbol of Peace. And even if we don't, how much will it hurt him to find children dead when he gets here? Maybe we can still wait for him. It would be nice, after we came all this way."

"Well that's the thing, isn't it?" Midoriya says. "You know you can kill him. …Just like you knew he would be here." Midoriya tilts his head to the side again, and that's when Shouta sees his student go for the throat. "Except he isn't, is he?"

Shigaraki goes still.

"You didn't know that All-Might wouldn't be here," Midoriya says. "You didn't know that Eraserhead would. You didn't even know what all our quirks were." And at that moment, Midoriya finally smiles at Shigaraki Tomura.

"Imagine what else you don't know, Mr. Shigaraki."

It's not a confident smirk, or a happy grin; it's just a bland, vague smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes because they're too busy playing host to a storm of fear and cold rage. Shouta can see it as clearly as if it's written on them, and it's so alien on a kind face like

Midoriya's that Shouta can imagine chills running up his own spine.

There's a tremor in the villain's hand, still half-raised to touch Midoriya and turn him to dust.

"I think," Midoriya says, "that you were right the first time. You've gotten so far, and done so well up to now, and everyone's going to be very impressed. So… why risk that?" His smile stretches wider. "Imagine how cool it would be, if you just… after you came in here, and did all this, if you just vanished without a trace, before anyone even got here to stop you. Right? That would be pretty cool."

Shigaraki doesn't reply out loud, but he does make an eager little noise. He's like a child, Shouta thinks. Easily distracted. Easily flattered. Easily taken in. And from the looks of it, Midoriya has noticed this. It's as close to a weak spot as he's going to get, and Midoriya is digging his nails in for all he's worth.

"Shigaraki," the warp villain says sharply. "Stop listening to this child. If you're going to kill him, do it."

"Shut up, Kurogiri." Shigaraki almost whines. "I'm *thinking*."

"The brat with the speed quirk already went for help," the warp villain, Kurogiri, warns him. Relief finds its way into Shouta's mind—so Iida, at least, is safe. Help is on the way. "We're running out of time."

"None of the pro heroes teaching at UA have speed quirks," Shigaraki says petulantly.

"Unless they do," Midoriya chips in. "You should listen to him."

It's a mistake. Shigaraki rounds on him in a fit of unpredictable temper, hand poised to reach for him again. "Don't tell me what to do —" he snarls.

Boom.

The explosion toward the entrance galvanizes Midoriya into action before Shouta even knows what's caused it. His student springs back, out of Shigaraki's reach, and catches Tsuyu by the arm to drag her along with him. They don't need to go far; Shigaraki isn't pursuing them. He's too busy whirling around to see what all the commotion is. The Noumu leaves Shouta's body on the ground and moves to flank him.

The dust settles, and All-Might steps into the facility, his voice booming out so that it reaches almost every corner.

“It’s all right now,” he says, and Shouta is close enough to hear the strangled almost-sob of relief from Midoriya. “Do you know why?”

His teeth are showing, stark white from beneath his lips. But he isn’t smiling. There’s a woman at his side, grim and silent. It’s not Midnight. It’s not anyone that Shouta recognizes. Her skin is pale and her eyes are blank and white—another ghost.

“Because **I** am here.”

Shouta is watching what happens next, and yet he sees almost nothing. In the space of a blink, villains go flying before All-Might reappears by his body. Another instant, and Shouta feels himself be violently jerked to the side by some invisible force. When he gets his bearings, they’re halfway across the plaza from where they were before. All of them—Midoriya, Asui, and All-Might, who lays his body down with a gentleness that Shouta grudgingly appreciates.

The dead boy reappears next to him, grinning. “Wow. For a second there I thought he’d lassoed you or something. You must really still be alive if you’re tied to your body like that.”

Shouta only half-hears him, too caught up in his own relief. “About time someone got here,” he mutters.

“Give him a break,” the ghostly woman at All-Might’s side snaps. “The principal held him up. I had to short-circuit half the lights in the room and knock tea all over the carpet just to give him the chance to slip off.”

Shouta sees the grin spread across Midoriya’s face, sees the boy look straight at the woman and see her. *Thank you,* his student mouths silently.

Midoriya can see them. There’s no getting around that; the dead are everywhere, and *Midoriya can see them.*

“Midoriya, Asui,” All-Might says quietly. “Head to the entrance. Take Aizawa with you—I leave him to you.”

It’s uncomfortably strange, being talked about like he isn’t there. “I’m *right here,*” Shouta says.

“They can’t see you,” the dead boy reminds him.

“They didn’t kill him?” Asui whispers. Her eyes are fixed on his body, wide with horror.

Midoriya locks eyes with Shouta again. The boy’s stare sharpens, considering him, searching his face. Shouta can only look back, helplessly lost, before Midoriya turns back to Asui.

“No,” he tells her. “He’s still alive.”

“Hurry!” All-Might urges.

They rush to obey, and Shouta would spare a moment to be touched if the situation weren’t so dire. And it *is* dire, though the students don’t know it. He and Thirteen had signaled each other before; All-Might has spent his time limit already. He must be running on fumes and a prayer at this point.

Midoriya and Asui heave his unconscious form off of the ground, while the dead boy hovers anxiously and the little girl darts around them unseen, gathering up the bloodied, trailing scarf to keep it from getting underfoot and tripping them. It is then that Midoriyahesitates and looks back.

“All-Might,” he says. “There’s something funny about the big one—Noumu. And you…” He’s oddly solemn, Shouta thinks. For a boy who so obviously hero-worships All-Might, he look almost unhappy to see him. Midoriya shoots a furtive glance toward Asui, before his throat bobs and he speaks again. “Is there time?”

He knows, Shouta realizes with a jolt.

“Young Midoriya.” All-Might turns to face him, and the smile is back in place. At his side, the ghost woman’s pale face mirrors it. “It’s going to be all right. Now please, get him to safety.”

Midoriya knows about the time limit. He knows, and All-Might knows that he knows, and what does this mean?

Tsuyu is staring at him.

Izuku can feel the full weight of her attention pressing on his mind. He isn’t looking directly at her, but he can feel her wide eyes boring into him all the same, watching him as if she expects him to sprout

fangs and shoot poison.

And why wouldn't she, after what she just saw him do?

Most people wouldn't talk that way to a villain. Most people would scream, would run, would shout and curse and threaten and spit defiance. Most people trembled before men who wore severed hands like trophies and crumbled flesh with a touch.

But Tsuyu has seen him look such a man in the eye, and talk to him like an acquaintance. She has seen him flatter and tease and lie with a smile on his face, not half a minute after seeing the villain stand by and laugh while his minion beat their teacher half to death.

This whole time, his classmates have mistaken him for someone normal. Someone cool, even. What will they think of him now, when Tsuyu tells the others what she's seen him do? What will they do when they find out how creepy and strange he is?

Izuku's eyes burn, and he ducks his head under the pretense of struggling under the weight of Aizawa's unconscious body. Friendship was nice while it lasted.

"Ts-Tsu—Asui," he says quietly, and his classmate starts at the sound of his voice. The burning in his eyes almost brings the blur of tears, but he blinks as hard as he can to fight them back. He turns to her, and tries to read the look in her eyes. Is that fear he sees? Tsuyu's looking at him like she's never seen him before. "Can you go on ahead?"

"What?" She croaks in surprise. "And leave you, Midoriya? What for?"

"The two of us are sitting ducks like this," he says. "I can carry him by myself until you bring back help—some people to help carry him, some to cover the others. Okay?"

She blinks, and the previous unnameable emotion in her eyes is replaced by a sort of worried determination. "Are you sure?"

"I'll be fine, just hurry back."

"...Okay." She slips out from under Aizawa's limp form, and stays just long enough to help Izuku readjust the weight before she takes off at leaps and bounds.

Finally alone, Izuku raises his head and looks at Aizawa again—not

the unconscious body he's carrying, but the faded almost-ghost who drifts along beside him. "Have you and Narita talked yet?" he asks. It's nowhere near the most pressing issue at the moment, but Izuku could use a distraction.

"What—"

"Not yet," Narita says. "I'm still waiting."

"Oh," Izuku says. Aizawa's limp weight isn't so bad if he just focuses on one step at a time. Tsuyu is fast and strong; she'll be back with help in no time. He only has so much time to talk. "What for?"

"If he dies, then we'll talk," Narita says. "If he wakes up after this, then he's going to forget everything he's seen and heard. That's what always happens with near-death experiences like this. So I won't waste my breath."

"You don't breathe, Narita," Izuku says.

"Stop talking about me like I'm not here," Aizawa says sharply.

"Sorry," Izuku says automatically. The moment the word is out, his throat feels tight, and the burning in his eyes is back.

"Don't cry, Midoriya." Somehow, Aizawa's voice is gruff but not unkind.

"Sorry," Izuku chokes out. "I'm sorry, it's my fault, it's—and you saved us, me and Tsuyu, and—if you die, it'll be my fault, and that's never happened before, and I didn't want—I didn't mean for this to happen."

"*They* did," Aizawa says.

Izuku blinks up at him, eyes blurring.

"You didn't mean for it to happen. They did." Aizawa looks back to the battling villains. "Making it more their fault than yours, wouldn't you agree?"

Izuku purses his lips to keep from crying. "He's out of time, isn't he," he half-whispers. "All-Might. If help doesn't come soon, they'll… he'll lose."

"He won't run out of time," Aizawa tells him. "He's stubborn like you. He'll be fine."

It takes a liar to spot a lie, and Izuku has been keeping secrets since he was five years old. He doesn't believe Aizawa, though he's grateful that his teacher cares enough to try to make him feel better.

"Since we have more pressing things to worry about, I won't ask you how you know about that," Aizawa goes on. "But you didn't answer my question before—you can see me. How?"

"No," Izuku blurts.

"Excuse me?"

Izuku meets his teacher's eyes again. "If I told you everything," he says, his voice shaking. "It would mean that you were dead, and you needed to be told. But you're not dead." His vision floods into a wet blur, and he blinks to let the tears fall and clear his eyes. "You're not dead and you're not going to die, and that means there's no point in telling you. Because you're going to wake up, Aizawa-sensei. And all of this will fade away like a bad dream." His hands are full, and he can't wipe his eyes. "I promise, you're going to wake up."

Before Aizawa can reply, there's a raspy, distorted cry, and Rei flickers into view in Izuku's path. He stumbles, almost dropping Aizawa, but her ice-cold hands steady both him and his burden. Her dark hair parts like a curtain, showing enough of her face for Izuku to see how frantic she is.

"Rei? What's wrong?"

She releases him to free up her hands so that she can sign. *He's in trouble,* she tells him without speaking. Her hands move frantically as they shape the words, one after another into a stream. *They trapped him he's in trouble he needs help he's hurting.*

Izuku stops so abruptly that he almost trips before he looks back. His stomach twists—All-Might is balanced precariously over one of Kurogiri's warps. The Noumu is visible from the waist up, protruding from the warp gate just far enough to grip All-Might in the ribs. Its fingers dig in, right at the spot where Izuku knows his scar is. Ms. Shimura claws uselessly at the Noumu, jaws open wide as she screams her fury.

Aizawa's ghost swears quietly.

I smell blood, Rei signs. *They'll kill him.*

Izuku sobs as every instinct in him burns to run back and help. But he can't do that without leaving Aizawa for dead. He can save Aizawa, whose almost-ghost stands before him and might become a real ghost if help doesn't come soon, or he can help All-Might, who trusted him with his power and his secrets and promised to train him into just as great a hero as Izuku has ever hoped to be.

"Whatever you're thinking of doing," Aizawa says. "Don't. And that's not just me being selfish. This is so you can save yourself, Midoriya."

"I don't want to save myself," Izuku whispers.

"Damn it, Midoriya, he stayed to fight to give you a chance to get away!" Aizawa snaps. "Don't throw that away so lightly!"

"I'm the only one who knows!" Izuku chokes out. "Nobody else—they don't know he's hurt, they don't know he's—"

"*Deku!*"

He turns forward again, and hope stabs him in the heart when he sees Tsuyu returning with Uraraka, Sero, and Satou with her. "*Hurry!*" he yells back, and his voice comes out cracked and raw and broken.

One touch from Uraraka lightens his burden, and he ducks out from under Aizawa's limp form. "Get him to safety," he blurts.

"Midoriya, don't," Aizawa's almost-ghost growls at him.

"I have to," he answers.

"Have to what?" Uraraka asks, but Izuku is already running. Rei keeps pace with him, her hair twisting like dark snakes, and he feels his own desperate fear and anger finally boil over. It lends him strength and speed.

He'll help. Whatever he can do to help, whatever he can sacrifice, he'll do it. All-Might will win.

Of course, it's not that simple. It's never that simple.

In the end, it's not so much a close call as it is a string of close calls, one after another. Every time All-Might is nearly beaten, something gets in the villains' way. First Izuku charging back into the fray after leaving Aizawa in his classmates' care. He can't do much on his own, but his other classmates are next to arrive—Bakugou, taking down the

warp villain with a well-placed explosion, and Todoroki, freezing the Noumu's limbs so that All-Might can escape its grip.

And finally, when the battle is truly dire, when One For All ebbs from All-Might's body and shatters the bones in Izuku's legs with a single desperate leap, the rest of Yuuei's faculty arrives, with Iida leading the way.

In the end, two villains escape, and no new ghosts are made that day.

Izuku is left lying injured on the ground. Rei hovers over him, humming anxiously, while Ms. Shimura stands by All-Might's side like a bodyguard. She's been strangely quiet this whole time, ever since she came back with him. But there's time to worry about that later; for now, tears of relief, shame, and leftover fear stream down his face.

He's okay. All-Might is okay. Izuku couldn't do much, but he could buy time; he stalled the villains the last few minutes before All-Might could arrive, and bought a precious handful of seconds to keep them from killing him before Iida's return with reinforcements.

He wasn't useless. He wasn't much, but he wasn't useless.

Only one more thing of note happens that afternoon, before paramedics arrive to take charge of him and All-Might.

"Hey! Midoriya!"

At the sound of Kirishima's voice, Izuku looks up to see his classmate running toward them with a worried look on his face.

"Are you guys okay?"

Izuku pushes himself up on his elbows. "I'm fine, but I can't get up," he calls back. "And—wait!" Realization hits him like a jolt of electricity. There's only a cloud of steam hiding All-Might's true form from view. If Kirishima gets too close… "Kirishima, stop! Don't come any closer!"

Rei leaves his side, blinking out of view to reappear in Kirishima's path. Her hair ripples, she thrusts her hands out to stop him, and he runs straight through her like he always does.

His face freezes. He stumbles, falling to one knee briefly before recovering his balance. For a moment he stands in place, wide-eyed and blinking hard.

“Are you okay?” Izuku calls.

“Yeah, fine,” Kirishima answers. “Just… felt someone walk over my grave, I guess.”

Cementoss arrives then, and sends Kirishima running back to the entrance. Rei returns to Izuku’s side with a proud smile on her face.

Izuku can only stare at her, speechless. She’s attacked people before, many times. She’s tried to hurt them, or slow them down.

She’s *tried*. This is the first time that Izuku has ever seen her succeed.

Chapter End Notes

CW: temporary character death, serious injury.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thanks to Recovery Girl, Izuku's legs heal in no time.

It's a blessing, because Izuku is certain that if he had spent any time in casts or on crutches, his mother would have worried herself into a distraction. She fusses over him as it is, and he lets her without complaint. She's always there to offer quiet hugs and his favorite foods after a particularly nasty ghost encounter, and after what he's just been through, Izuku needs nothing less. Even with his legs healed, he can't stand up for long, not without shaking like a leaf until he's ready to fall over.

School is closed the following day, and Izuku takes the opportunity to sleep until his brain damn well wants him to wake up. Rei stands guard in his room through the night, humming softly until the buzz lulls him to sleep. He drifts off with Mika curled up on the pillow behind his head, and at some point during the night, she crawls into his arms and sleeps purring against his chest. After all the fighting, panicking, and quirk-facilitated healing he's done all day, he sleeps like a rock.

In fact, it's the first night in a very long time that Izuku is able to sleep without any dreams at all.

He wakes up feeling soft and content. Slowly, he lets his heavy eyelids drift open on their own, with his arms full of warm cat and his stomach growling comfortably for breakfast and sunlight shining through his window and Rei hissing and snarling in the distance.

…Wait, what was that last one?

Mika trills softly as he heaves himself out of bed. Rei is nowhere to be seen, but he can hear her; he knows what she sounds like by heart. Yawning, he gets dressed and wanders into the bathroom.

The bathroom is already occupied, by the ghost of a young woman fixing her hair in front of the mirror. There's little point when she doesn't cast a reflection, but Izuku's not about to judge.

"Morning, Ms. Morino." Izuku swallows a yawn. "Could I have the

bathroom real quick? Won't be two minutes."

"Oh, of course!" Morino Naoko vanishes, and doesn't reappear until Izuku's flushed the toilet and turned on the sink. "You sure slept late."

"Long day. I almost died."

She whistles, and goes back to trying to fix her hair in front of the useless mirror. "That would've been awful. Is that why Rei's in a pet this morning? She's been throwing a tantrum, and it's making the rest of us a bit edgy. Kurosawa won't come out of the hall closet until she's quiet." She pauses. "Could I borrow your hand? I just need you to hold this for a few seconds."

"Sure." Izuku reaches over and holds the braided bun in place while Morino clips it. "Couldn't you just… make yourself look like this?"

"I guess. I like doing my hair, though. It's about the journey, not the destination. Thank you, Midoriya."

"You're welcome. I'll go check on Rei." Izuku splashes water on his face to wake himself up, and walks out into the living room.

"Oh, good, you're up," Mom says, and subjects him to a hug and a good-morning kiss on the cheek. "How're you feeling?"

"I slept… really well," he says. "Better than I thought I would."

"I'm glad." She beams at him. "Are all your friends all right, too?"

"Oh, yeah they're fine. Nobody got hurt." *Except me, and Aizawa-sensei, and All-Might.*

"And your ghost friends?" she asks. "I was afraid something might be wrong; I woke up early this morning because the TV turned on by itself, and I've been hearing noises every now and then. And not the normal noises, either."

As if on cue, Izuku hears Rei shriek in the distance. The lights flicker, and a nearby window rattles against the pane. "Something might be bothering Rei. I'll go check—I'll be right back."

"Be safe, Izuku."

He slips on his shoes but doesn't bother tying them before he goes outside. This happens from time to time; once in a while Rei gets territorial and throws a fit if some other ghost tries to move in and

start haunting the place without her say-so. She tolerates the quieter ones, like Ms. Morino (grad student, hit by a drunk driver) and Kurosawa (shopkeeper, shot in a robbery gone wrong) and Mrs. Matsuda (retired yoga instructor, heart attack) who do little more than blink the hallway lights, whisper in the walls, or mess with doors, but some ghosts just get on her nerves. It doesn't take much to defuse these conflicts, though.

Mika trails at his heels as he steps outside. "Rei?" he calls, cautiously. "Rei, what's the matter?"

A moment later, she blinks into view in front of him, scowling like she's been denied sweets. She signs to him. *She won't leave,* she says.

"Who won't leave?" he asks.

The words are barely out of his mouth when the source of consternation materializes out of thin air and sends him staggering back in surprise.

"Oh good, you're up," Ms. Shimura says without preamble. "I was going to wake you up earlier, but your friend here pitched a fit and wouldn't let me."

Rei sticks her tongue out, much farther than any human tongue would be able to stretch.

"And I mean, it's been hours," Ms. Shimura continues. "I know I'm dead and time has no meaning anymore, but. Come on."

"W-what are you doing here?" Izuku fights to keep his voice low. He's disturbed the neighbors before by accident, and the last thing he wants is to wake anyone up even this late in the morning.

"I wanted to talk to you about—did you eat breakfast?"

There's enough whiplash in that sentence to give Izuku a sore neck. "I… no? I just woke up. Recovery Girl healed my legs yesterday, so I was really out of it, and…"

"Go eat breakfast," Ms. Shimura says. "And then come down to the park. I'll be waiting."

She vanishes, and Izuku blinks a few times before heading back inside.

"Everything okay?" Mom asks.

“I think so, yeah,” he says. “There’s just a… Is it okay if I go out after breakfast? Someone needs to talk to me.”

“Well… I-I don’t see why not.” She’s still nervous; after what happened yesterday, Izuku doesn’t blame her for wanting him to stay inside all day. Had he stayed injured, he’s sure she would have insisted on it. But thankfully, at least for now, she seems all right with letting things go as normal.

He barely tastes his breakfast, too busy wondering why Ms. Shimura came to visit. She said she was here for hours, even—where’s All-Might? Why isn’t she with him? She never strays far from him, and even if she does, it’s never for very long.

And, after what happened at the USJ, Izuku would have expected her to be glued to his side, at least for a while. And yet, here she is, paying a visit and enduring hours of Rei’s irate scolding just to wait for him to get up.

He takes his dishes to the kitchen when he’s done, only for Mom to take them out of his hands. “You go on,” she says. “Whatever it is, go ahead and take care of it. I’ll wash up.”

“I can—it’ll only take a moment, you don’t have to—”

She won’t take no for an answer, and shoos him out the door. Mika slips out with him.

“Make sure she doesn’t run off, now,” Mom calls after him.

“We’ll be fine,” he replies. “Thanks, Mom.”

The park is only a few blocks away. It’s a nice little spot, with picnic tables and a playground for kids. There are trees further in, for shade or a quiet spot away from the road. The whole place is grassy and well-kept, and at the moment it’s almost empty. Ms. Shimura waits for him away from the road, where trees and shade deflect the attention of passersby. At the sight of her, Izuku breaks into a jog.

“Ms. Shimura!” He slows as he approaches her. “What’s going on? Is All-Might okay? How come you’re so far away from him?”

She doesn’t answer immediately. Her arms are crossed over her chest as she regards him with her blank white eyesockets and starkly pale face. Izuku can’t help but fidget under her scrutiny. Rei is close to his side, silent. Mika rubs against his leg, mewing until he stoops to pet

her.

“W-what’s this about?” he asks as he straightens up again.

“This is about you,” she answers. “This is about what happened yesterday. And… this is about me, changing my stance on… certain things.”

He searches her face, his confusion evolving into curiosity. “What kind of things?”

Her form flickers, and she stands before him with her arm outstretched, palm out. “Hit me.”

“W-what?”

“You heard me.” Her face is unreadable. “Throw a punch. Don’t put any One For All behind it—I just want to see your form.”

Mystified, he complies, and feels his fist smack against the flat of her hand.

She shakes her head. “Just as I thought.”

Izuku’s brow furrows. “What was that about my form?”

“You don’t have any, that’s what,” she says. “That’s your biggest problem right now, kiddo. You have the strength—even without One For All, you’re built like a brick shithouse and you have strength in spades—but you don’t know what to do with it.”

“Um.” He feels like he ought to be insulted, but mostly he just knows that she’s right. “I haven’t really…”

“You haven’t learned any basics,” she finishes for him. “It’s not your fault. All-Might’s new at teaching, and Yuuei’s curriculum focuses on strategy, teamwork, and most of all the strengthening of one’s quirk. But you? Your quirk doesn’t need strengthening; you do.”

“I know that,” Izuku replies, trying to ignore the sinking feeling of shame at the statement. He blinks, and the feeling ebbs. “Wait… wait, does this mean…? Are you saying you’re going to—”

“I didn’t want it to come to this,” Ms. Shimura tells him, her face falling. “I wanted to just… stay an observer. I wanted to let All-Might train you—it’s *his* right to raise you as a hero, and I don’t want to take that away from him.” Her brow furrows, and she looks at him with

her face set with determination. “But after what happened yesterday, it’s clear to me that I can’t afford to stay on the sidelines. And if you still can’t use One For All without ending up in the hospital, then the very least I can do is teach you to defend yourself, quirk or no quirk.”

Izuku stands a little taller. “You’re going to teach me how to fight?”

She moves before he has the chance to react, slips past what little defenses he has, and knocks his feet out from under him. The next thing he knows, he’s flat on his back in the grass, staring up into her face as she stands over him. “Here’s what’s gonna happen, half-pint,” she says. “You’ll continue your studies at Yuuei, and your training with All-Might. And in the meantime, I’ll be getting the basics of hand-to-hand combat between your ears by any means necessary.” She leans down toward him. “With any luck, I’ll be able to knock some lessons into you that stick well enough that you have something to show for it at the Sports Festival.” She casts a glance to the side, where Rei is hissing in protest at the rough handling. “So, with that in mind, I’d appreciate it if you told your friend here not to chew on me just because you might be a slow learner.”

Izuku’s heart quickens, and he scrambles to his feet and stands at his tallest height. “She won’t. She’ll behave.” He gives Rei a meaningful look before turning back to Ms. Shimura. “And I won’t be a slow learner.” He bobs his head in a short, grateful bow. “You won’t regret this, I promise. Thank you for teaching me.”

The smile she gives him is a dangerous one. “Don’t thank me yet, shorty.” Her form blinks, and she reappears at his side, hands on his shoulders to shift his stance. “Lesson number one. Here’s the *right* way to throw a punch.”

By the end of the lesson, Izuku is sore, sweaty, grass-stained, and has had the wind knocked out of him no less than four separate times.

Unless one counts the moment All-Might took him on as a successor, he has never been happier.

Izuku’s feet drag as he makes his way down the hall to his classroom. It’s not just weariness that makes his body feel heavy, though he has plenty of that. The incident at USJ left him exhausted enough to sleep without dreams that night; on the night after, he was not so lucky. After eight hours of bad dreams and cold sweats that not even Mika’s purring could keep away, Izuku feels like death warmed over.

And on top of it all, there are people he has to face. Classmates. Tsuyu.

Aizawa.

The last one, at least, he does not need to fear for long. Narita meets him in the hallway and gives him some good news.

“He doesn’t remember,” is the first thing Narita says to him. “At least, I don’t think he does. And he’s okay. That’s probably more important.”

“Okay,” Izuku whispers. He feels as if he could sink through the floor. That’s one weight off his chest; he didn’t get his homeroom teacher killed, and Aizawa doesn’t remember what he saw.

Still, he braces himself as he opens the door and walks into the classroom. There are things he’s desperately hoped he could leave behind in middle school, but now as he steps in, he can almost hear it already.

What a freak. If he wasn’t quirkless I might actually be scared of him.

You never know. He’s the kind of guy who might snap.

He’s so creepy. I saw him talking to a wall.

He’ll stare at you like you’re not even there. He’s like a walking corpse.

Quirkless creep.

You can’t fix crazy.

“Midoriya!”

Kirishima’s voice cuts through the rest of the classroom conversations, and Izuku freezes in his tracks as his classmate vaults over a desk to get to him. On instinct he grasps Rei’s hand and tries to ground himself when she squeezes back. Everyone else in the room, alerted by Kirishima’s call, is now looking at him. Kaminari, Uraraka, Sero, Iida, Tsuyu—Bakugou, too. Izuku’s ears roar with panic, and it’s all he can do not to turn tail before Kirishima reaches him.

“Dude!” Kirishima’s sharp teeth show in a wide grin. “Tsuyu told us you stared down that creepy hands guy at the USJ! Is that true?”

Izuku blinks. The roaring in his ears cuts off abruptly. “U-um. I… guess?”

Kirishima thumps his shoulder, nearly knocking him off balance. “Man, I never knew you had it in you, dude!”

“I-I… what?”

“I heard he had some kind of disintegrating quirk!” Sero pipes up. “Didn’t he almost grab you?”

“H-he, um, he did grab me,” Izuku stammers. “Both of us, me and Tsuyu. But Aizawa-sensei erased his quirk, and…”

“Damn, dude,” Kaminari shakes his head. “That must’ve been intense.”

“I was so scared I couldn’t move,” Tsuyu says loudly. “I’m pretty sure he was gonna kill us, but then Midoriya just looked him straight in the eye and started talking to him, like it was nothing. And he kept him talking ‘til All-Might got there.”

“That was really clever of you, Deku!” Uraraka calls.

“Weren’t you scared, Midoriya?” Ashido asks.

“Witless.” Izuku isn’t quite sure what to do with this. This is not what he expected. “I just… I got so scared that I came back around to calm, I guess? I-I didn’t really know what I was doing, I just wanted to distract him long enough to keep him from killing us.” He’s close to panic again, but now it’s for a different reason.

“That sounds so cool,” Kirishima gushes. “I wish I could’ve seen that.”

“Y-you think so?” Izuku asks.

“Of course we do!” Kirishima stares at him like it’s the stupidest question he’s ever heard. “Why wouldn’t we? You stared down a villain and you didn’t even *flinch*.”

“So you...” The words catch in his throat for a moment. “You don’t think it’s… I dunno… creepy?”

“Oh it was super creepy,” Tsuyu calls out again. “Especially the part where you smiled at him.”

Izuku winces.

“No no no, dude, don’t worry.” Kirishima claps him on the shoulder again, jostling him a little. “That’s a *good* thing.”

“It is?” Izuku gapes at him, bewildered.

“Totally!” Kirishima spreads his hands wide. “We’re all gonna be heroes, right? If you’re creepy, then that just means you can scare the villains, you know?”

“Oh.” Izuku opens and shuts his mouth a few times, too baffled to manage words immediately. “I… never thought about it that way.”

“It’s kinda like All-Might, but different,” Tsuyu muses. “He scares villains by being super strong, and you can scare them by smiling at them like you’re about to eat a baby.”

“Um…” Izuku feels like that’s meant as a compliment, but he’s not quite sure. It’s mind-blowing to be compared to All-Might in any way, but baby-eating is definitely not what he was going for.

“Your quirk’s pretty similar to his already,” Tsuyu adds, and Izuku almost chokes on the air he’s breathing.

“Are you okay, though?” Uraraka asks. “It was super brave what you did, but you also got hurt pretty bad.”

“I’m fine,” Izuku assures her. The weight of everyone’s attention is beginning to overwhelm him, so he grasps desperately for an out. “I-I mean, we can’t forget Iida. He’s the one who went and got help, remember? We would’ve all been in trouble otherwise.”

This deflects attention, at least for the moment, and the conversation shifts to back-slapping Iida while Izuku flees to his seat. He passes by Todoroki’s desk, and almost trips over his feet when he sees that his classmate—the strongest student in his class, no less—is still watching him with an expression that Izuku can’t quite decipher. But Todoroki doesn’t stop him, or say anything, so Izuku moves on and takes his seat.

Beneath the shock, confusion, and burning embarrassment, he can’t deny the tiny spark of unexpected pleasure that this conversation has brought. His classmates have seen him, *really* seen him. Maybe not enough to know about the ghosts, but they’ve seen what his middle school classmates used to see every day, and they aren’t whispering behind their hands, or scooting away from him, or calling him crazy.

Maybe… maybe they haven’t mistaken him for someone cool. Maybe they just think he’s cool.

He jumps when Aizawa finally appears, face wrapped in bandages like a mummy, but he makes it through the period without any more incidents.

In spite of the attack on the school, business is going on as usual. The Sports Festival is two weeks away; when Aizawa makes that announcement, Izuku absently rubs at one of his many bruises from Ms. Shimura's training. With her help, hopefully he'll be ready for whatever his classmates can throw at him.

He's walking out of the classroom for lunch when Aizawa's voice stops him. "Midoriya, a word."

Shit, he thinks, but there's no avoiding this. His classmates all file out, leaving him alone with his homeroom teacher.

Mostly alone, anyway. Narita's still there, and Rei is at his side as always. When Aizawa steps closer, Izuku looks instinctively to her, in case she tries to bite him again like she usually does. After she stopped Kirishima in his tracks at the USJ, he isn't sure he can just let her do that anymore.

But she doesn't.

She doesn't snap, or growl, or change her face into a frightening mask. When Aizawa moves within reach, she wanders over to bat at the trailing end of his scarf.

"Y-yes, Sensei?" he answers, remembering where he is. His heart beats in his throat.

"I seem to recall a rather devil-may-care attitude from you, the other day," Aizawa says.

"Um."

"Not to mention what I overheard Asui saying," Aizawa continues.

"O-oh." He's not talking about the ghosts, Izuku realizes with a shudder of relief. He's talking about Izuku's recklessness. That, he can deal with.

"There's a saying about the difference between bravery and stupidity," Aizawa tells him. "It's only brave if it works. You do understand how close you came to being killed on Wednesday." It's not a question.

“Yes.” The floor draws Izuku’s eyes. He remembers, not for the first time, that it’s only because of the man before him that Shigaraki didn’t turn him and Tsuyu to dust.

“You’re not short of nerve, I’ll give you that.” It’s so close to a compliment that Izuku jerks his head up again, surprised. “But I don’t think I need to tell you that if All-Might hadn’t shown up when he did, both you and Asui would be dead right now.”

“I-I know.”

“So in the future,” Aizawa continues. “Don’t run into danger unless there’s a good chance you *won’t* become another casualty.”

“I understand, Sensei.” He wants to look at the floor again, but he forces himself to keep his head raised. “Thank you.”

He doesn’t see Aizawa raise his eyebrow with the bandages in the way, but he can practically feel it.

“For—” The words catch in Izuku’s throat. “I mean, when you...”

Aizawa sighs and turns back to his desk. “Go to lunch, Midoriya. Before you embarrass both of us.”

Reddening, Izuku mumbles something in reply and obeys.

Ghosts are easy to talk to. The living are not.

Izuku’s two weeks of training take off from there.

It’s a strange balance for Izuku, trying to focus on getting stronger while not spending too much time thinking about why. If he lets his mind fixate on it, then he’ll crack for sure. After the USJ incident, all eyes are on his class. Everyone will be watching. Pro heroes looking to snap up sidekicks will be watching. Most of the other students in their year seem to share a single-minded determination to beat them and show the world that Class 1-A isn’t so tough.

All-Might’s time limit is getting shorter and shorter now that he’s passed on his quirk, and he wants Izuku to use the festival to announce his arrival to the whole world.

No pressure or anything.

And so, Izuku throws himself into getting ready. He strengthens his

grip at the dinner table, finds himself reaching for his weights and lifting sets with no memory of starting. Mrs. Matsuda, former yoga teacher during her life, shows him a few useful stretches that he can do while he's resting, watching TV, or doing homework.

And of course, Ms. Shimura takes him outside every day to teach him how not to get the crap kicked out of him.

"So," Ms. Shimura says at one training session, after she sends Izuku sprawling to the ground for the hundredth time. "What did you learn from that?"

Izuku spits out grass and picks himself back up. "That you fight dirty?"

She laughs at that. "It's not fighting dirty if you're fighting on the same level as the villains you're trying to take down, half-pint. Because believe you me, they *will* fight dirty." She stands over him with her arms akimbo, showing off hard muscle.

Not for the first time, Izuku wonders who she was in her life. He wonders if she was a hero, too. With every session and lesson that leaves Izuku sweaty and aching, it seems more and more likely.She's only been teaching him for about a week, but he's learned so much that he finds himself visualizing moves and throws in class, at the dinner table, on the way to school, and when he lies awake in bed. He mentally runs through the defenses she drills into him, even going through motions with his hands whenever he happens to be standing still. It's not a good combination with his tendency to space out; just the day before, he elbowed Todoroki in the ribs by accident outside the restroom, and nearly knocked Iida's tray out of his hands while in line for lunch. He only has so much time before the festival, and he's determined to etch Ms. Shimura's lessons into his brain and his muscles. If he can't always trust his mind not to freeze up on him, then at the very least he ought to trust his muscle memory.

Izuku staggers to his feet, panting a little as he catches his breath. "Do I have to stoop to their level, though? I thought the point was that we're better than that."

"This isn't a game, beansprout," Ms. Shimura tells him, shaking her head. "You can't afford to keep score when there are civilian lives on the line—lives that you are protecting and the villains are threatening, if you need help with perspective." She reaches out and clips his chin lightly. "Remember, heroes are trained to act in a crisis, to break

things if they have to, and to protect people by taking down whoever or whatever is trying to hurt them. You can't afford to get dainty when you're going toe to toe with a villain—especially with a quirk like yours."

"My quirk is strong, though," Izuku murmurs.

"Sure is," Ms. Shimura nods. "It's strong at *close range*. You're not that Todoroki kid, or the one that drops glitter and shoots lasers out of his belly button—you can't attack from a distance, the way you are. Until you harness that power properly, your only way to fight is to get up close and personal. And when someone's trying to beat you into unconsciousness, you can't get squeamish. Aim for weak spots. Throw sand in their eyes. Insult their mothers. Fake a weakness so they drop their guard."

"That doesn't sound very heroic." Izuku brushes uselessly at the green smear on the front of his shirt.

"Heroism isn't always pretty, short-stack," Ms. Shimura sighs. "It's not all fun and glory. Sometimes it's a sweaty chore. If it helps, don't think of it like fighting dirty—think of it as fighting *smart*. You have to be willing to fight this way if you hope to defend yourself against bigger, stronger opponents." She pauses. "Which might happen, unless you limit yourself to fighting crimes committed by small children. Or large house cats."

"Hey!"

Rei cackles.

"That's the hard truth of it, at least until you figure out your quirk." Ms. Shimura tells him. "'Til then, I'm gonna make sure you know how to navigate a fight."

"So far, I've been navigating my way face-first into the ground," Izuku says. He's glad he picked a shirt and pants he didn't care that much about, because he isn't sure his mother will be able to get these grass stains out.

"You're improving, though," Ms. Shimura assures him with a smile. "You're getting quicker—I can see it already. I'm starting to have to work hard to knock you off your feet."

"I don't think I've fought this much in… ever," Izuku admits. "I mostly… I never used to fight very much. I'd mostly just talk, or run."

“Well, you’ve been doing a lot less of that ever since you got started,” she says. “I saw you when—when those villains attacked. You stand your ground, and that’s good.”

“Except when my legs broke,” Izuku points out.

“It’s a work in progress.” Ms. Shimura smacks her fist against her palm. “So far, with every fight I’ve seen you get into, the other guy’s been the one with the upper hand. You’re a student, and you’re inexperienced with your quirk, so that’s going to keep happening.”

“Then what do I do about it?” Izuku asks.

“Simple, kiddo.” Ms. Shimura smiles at him, and takes another fighting stance. “If someone thinks they have the upper hand, then you *break it*. Now, attack me again.”

Chapter End Notes

CW: Mentions of past bullying.

Chapter 11

“Last school day before the Sports Festival, my boy,” All-Might says. “How do you feel?”

There are a few too many answers to that question for Izuku to pick just one. In the end, his brain is so cluttered with adjectives that his mouth jumps the gun, and what comes out is “Hungry, mostly.”

It’s not his fault All-Might decided to pull him aside for a conversation right when class let out for lunch, but here they are.

Before Izuku has the chance to get embarrassed, All-Might gives a good-natured chuckle that puts him at ease. “I think I walked into that one,” he says. “Don’t worry, I won’t keep you long.”

Izuku tries again. “I’m… nervous, I guess? I’m trying to prepare myself, but I’m also trying not to think about it too hard.”

“Don’t avoid the thought too much, my boy,” All-Might tells him. “That’s a good way to get overwhelmed when you come face to face with it.”

Pursing his lips, Izuku makes a noncommittal noise and tries to ignore the ice-cold feeling in the pit of his stomach. It’s usually easier to ignore; most fear is. But when he thinks too long about the coming Sports Festival, it grips him like cold claws.

“I’ve seen you in training,” All-Might continues. “You’re getting faster, and your reaction time is improving.”

There’s a warm note in All-Might’s voice as he says this, and it melts some of the ice in Izuku’s veins. In spite of himself, he looks up and brightens when he sees that his teacher’s ever-present smile has a hint of approval in it. “I’ve been practicing,” he says, before he has the chance to think better of it.

“Oh?” All-Might sounds interested, and Izuku could kick himself because now he has to elaborate. Not far, Ms. Shimura pauses in the midst of drifting around keeping a lookout to offer up an encouraging grin and a thumbs-up, which is nice of her but not very helpful.

“One of my mom’s friends used to be a yoga teacher,” Izuku says. “She knows some fitness people, and I’ve been getting self-defense advice.”

He glances at Ms. Shimura with just a brief flicker of his eyes. “I figure I’m, um, already pretty strong, even without One For All, so if I just. Apply it.” Lies are easy if he includes enough truth in them.

All-Might’s grin widens. “Excellent idea.” For a split second he looked almost sheepish. “I ought to have thought of that sooner—well, in any case, it seems to be working.”

Nearby, Ms. Shimura’s smile fades, and she shifts uncomfortably to a different stance. Izuku blinks at her, hoping he’s conveying his concern to her without catching All-Might’s attention.

“This is good,” All-Might goes on, unaware. “Come to think of it, I’ve been neglecting basic hand-to-hand with you.” His brow furrows thoughtfully. “Hmm. I’ve been hesitant, because of the strength difference between us, especially since you’re still strengthening yourself to use One For All. Still, I’ll have to remedy that. I’ll be in the audience during the festival—I’ll see where you are, how you can improve, and shift my training strategies accordingly.”

Izuku shifts from foot to foot, cringing slightly at the stab of guilt he feels to his gut. He could have asked All-Might for help with this earlier. But instead, he’s been so caught up in the excitement that he’s left his own teacher in the dark, purely by accident. He’ll just have to make it up to him by doing well in the Festival.

A thought occurs to him then. “How much time do you have?” he asks. “You said your time limit went down after what happened at the USJ.”

“Not to worry,” All-Might assures him. “I’ve been keeping to the teacher’s lounge for that reason—I only stepped out to discuss the sports festival with you one last time.”

“It’s still fifty minutes, right?” Izuku can’t help but press the subject. “It went down so fast—”

Ms. Shimura reappears at his side. “The Todoroki kid’s coming,” she warns, and Izuku’s mouth snaps shut on instinct as he turns in the direction she’s just come from.

Sure enough, his classmate rounds the corner a moment later, pausing in mid-step when he catches sight of them. His eyes snap up, and—Izuku is somewhat embarrassed that he’s only just noticed Todoroki’s eyes. They’re mismatched; the one on the right is dark brown, almost black, and the one on the left is pale blue. How has he never noticed

that before?

...Probably because Todoroki has literally never talked to him before. Not that that's a surprise; as far as Izuku can tell, Todoroki doesn't really talk to anyone.

"Afternoon, young Todoroki," All-Might greets him. Izuku, still feeling jitters after Todoroki came so close to overhearing, manages a nervous smile and a wave.

Todoroki's flat expression never changes—for all that he rarely looks in Todoroki's direction, Izuku has never seen him with any other—and he offers a polite nod in return before moving past them.

"He's gone," Ms. Shimura remarks, and Izuku blurts out one of the thoughts at the forefront of his mind.

"He's the one to beat, isn't he," he says. It's not a question.

"Don't focus too much on just one of your classmates, my boy," All-Might reminds him. "Every student in your grade will be competing, after all. You have *plenty* of competition to beat."

That certainly doesn't help his jitters. Izuku takes a deep breath and blinks hard, hoping to ward them off.

"Now's not the time to get shy, young Midoriya." All-Might claps his shoulder lightly. Time limits aside, it's still enough to rock Izuku on his feet. "Unless you don't feel ready?"

No, he doesn't feel ready. If he had months to prepare, he wouldn't feel ready. He has a quirk he can't control and an army's worth of classmates looking to crush the competition. And yet…

"I'm doing everything I can to prepare," he murmurs, half to himself. "I don't think there's anything else I *can* do, aside from what I'm already doing."

"Then there's no point in being nervous, now is there?" All-Might says. "Try trusting yourself, Midoriya."

Izuku takes another deep breath, and lets it out.

"Guess I'll have to."

The day of the festival arrives. Izuku wakes that morning to the

feeling of Rei tickling his nose, and stumbles his way through getting dressed, eating breakfast, and a hug from Mom.

“I’ll be watching on TV,” she whispers in his ear. “Good luck, sweetheart.”

“Thanks Mom,” he murmurs back, and he’s out the door after that. He’s surprised when Rei doesn’t follow him immediately, but not worried. He’ll be late if he doesn’t get going, and she’ll catch up. She always does.

He makes his way to school in a mental fog. A fog is better than raw nerves and growing panic—just a calm, muted buzz as he goes along. Not for the first time, he wishes his mother could have come, but security is tight and the live seats are more for talent scouts than parents. Besides, she gets just as nervy and panicky as he does; if this festival is going to involve what Izuku thinks it will, then it’s probably a good thing that she’ll be at home.

It would be nice to have Rei along for a distraction. What’s taking her so long?

He reaches the stadium, and his eyes slide up and further up. The facility is huge, and crowds are forming as spectators and pro heroes looking to scout out promising students gather near the entrances. Izuku gives them a wide berth, and heads for the much quieter student entrance. He braces himself, hoping against hope that he won’t run into any of the kids from 1-B, or that one Gen Ed student. What was his name? Shinsou, that was it.

All-Might was right; there are a lot of people to beat in this competition.

A shiver runs through him. He stops, surprised. What was that shiver for? Is he afraid? Nervous?

No. Well, yes. He is, of course he is. It’s impossible not to be. And yet…

He’s *excited*.

“Hey, Midoriya!”

“Deku!”

The fog in his head begins to lift when he hears Kirishima and

Uraraka's voices. His classmates are coming in from a different direction, waving for his attention, and he jogs to meet them.

Uraraka's grinning, but it's not her usual cheerful smile. She's grinning like she's ready to punch someone in the teeth. "You ready for today, Deku?" she asks.

He tries to match her smile, but he's not sure his face was built for an expression like that. (Even though, apparently, he *can* smile like he's about to eat a baby.) "Ready as I'll ever be."

"I am so pumped!" Kirishima fist-pumps for emphasis. "I was *born* ready. Bring it!"

Izuku finds himself laughing, and some of the nervous knots in the pit of his stomach loosen. It's hard to be anything but comfortable around Kirishima. "Does this make us rivals for the day?"

"Whatever!" Uraraka punches the air. "You can be rivals and friends at the same time!"

"I… guess so…" Izuku's not really an authority on having friends, so he can't comment.

"Man, Uraraka, you're really psyched for this," Kirishima laughs. "How do you feel, Midoriya?"

"Uh, well, I guess I'm—"

Izuku doesn't get to finish that sentence, thanks to a high-pitched, trilling wail that cuts him off before he gets another word out. His first thought is *ghost*, which would be embarrassing because from his friends' point of view he's just lost his train of thought mid-sentence. But it's not a ghost, because Kirishima's looking around in confusion, and Uraraka looks startled. She glances over his shoulder, and her eyes go a little wider. Izuku follows her gaze, and his mouth drops open.

Rei has finally caught up with him. She's trotting up to the student entrance, her bare feet not quite touching the ground. At her heels, collar tag jingling, Mika trots along and lets out another bubbly meow of a greeting. The moment she's close enough, she practically tackles Izuku's ankles.

"Mika, *what*—" Izuku bends down and scoops her off the ground. She headbutts his chin and purrs loudly. "*Why?*" He directs this question

with a brief glance at Rei.

She wanted to come, Rei signs, with an unrepentant smile.

“Midoriya, is that your cat?” Kirishima asks. He sounds like he’s trying not to laugh.

Izuku gives them both a helpless look over the purring cat in his arms. “I don’t—she must’ve slipped out and followed me.”

“She’s so cute!” Uraraka coos. She reaches out, and Mika stretches her head forward and meets her halfway for a scratch behind the ears. “What’s her name again?”

“I-it’s Mika.” He doesn’t need this. He was already nervous, and he doesn’t need this. He has to compete in the festival. What on earth is he supposed to do with her while he’s busy? By now, it’s too late to take her back home.

“Hi there, Mika!” Kirishima reaches out to pet her. “Look at you, aren’t you a sweetheart? Oh—her eye. You’ve got a little battle scar there, don’t you?”

“We’d better head in,” Uraraka says, still twirling her finger around Mika’s ear.

“What am I gonna do?” Izuku isn’t quite panicking, but he’s definitely at a loss here. “I can’t take her in to the festival, I have to compete, and—”

“I bet she’d be okay in the waiting room,” Kirishima says. “Also, there’s time to check on her between events. You know. If you get that far.”

“Thanks,” Izuku says dryly.

“Let’s just go in,” Uraraka suggests. “Figure it out as we go. Unless you want to call your mom, or try and take her back home.”

“Can’t,” Izuku sighs. “It’s too far, and my mom doesn’t have a car.”

“Tough luck,” Kirishima says. “Well, like Uraraka said, let’s go in and see what happens. Maybe somebody can watch her for you. Recovery Girl, maybe?”

“I don’t know if she’d want a cat around where she deals with patients.” Izuku frets, while Mika purrs away without a care in the

world.

“I bet if you asked Kouda, he could tell her to stay in the waiting room and behave herself,” Uraraka points out. “It’s probably not as bad as you think, Deku.”

“It’s usually worse.” Reluctantly, Izuku follows them in, though not before shooting Rei a glare. He can’t believe his bad luck. He’s spent the past two weeks avoiding his impending anxiety wall, and now he’s going to crash straight into thanks to his *cat*.

Luckily, the student entrance is a lot quieter than the main one, so they don’t meet a lot of people on the way in. Living people, that is. There are plenty of ghosts for Izuku to look at as he walks through the hallways.

...More than he would have expected, to be honest.

There are dozens of them, of all shapes and sizes and ages, men and women and children alike, constantly on the move, talking amongst themselves in low tones. A few pairs of blank white eyes turn to look at him as he passes, watching them all. Some of them drift closer, only to shy away when Rei growls.

It takes him a few minutes of walking and watching to figure out what’s wrong. It’s not just that there are a lot of them—they’re *restless*. They’re constantly flitting about, milling around in the hallways, all of them on edge. It makes them look more numerous than they really are.

They’re almost to the Class 1-A waiting room when he catches sight of a familiar face. Mrs. Kitayama spots him from down the hall and reappears at his side. “Oh, Midoriya, we’ve been looking for you.”

“We?” Izuku asks softly.

Uraraka glances at him. “Did you say something, Deku?”

“Nothing. Just talking to myself.”

“Narita and me,” Mrs. Kitayama says. “We wanted to give you a quick heads-up.” This time Izuku simply cocks his head instead of answering out loud. “We’ve been here since early, because of Eraserhead, and it wasn’t this bad then. But something’s happened. It might be another soul who arrived here, though I’m not sure who. Or where, for that matter.” She pauses, fretting. “Whoever it is, they’re in a bit of a

temper. It's enough to make the rest of us nervous."

Izuku's eyebrows rise. It's not uncommon; strictly speaking, the only thing that can hurt a ghost is another ghost. And when they lose their tempers, they tend to lash out at whoever or whatever happens to be within reach. It's enough to make other ghosts avoid them.

In a place this size, though… the angry one's either close by, or just really, *really* angry.

Great, he thinks, as Rei growls softly beside him. *One more thing to worry about.*

He walks into the waiting room with his one-eyed cat trotting happily at his heels, and finds most of his class already there…

…along with Aizawa.

Izuku stops dead, letting the door swing shut behind him. His teacher glances at him, does a double-take, and lowers his attention to the cat currently twining herself around Izuku's ankles, all without saying a word.

Izuku wonders desperately why the floor hasn't opened up and swallowed him yet.

"I can explain," he says.

"That your cat, Midoriya?" Aizawa asks, stepping closer for a better look. His face is still swathed in bandages from the USJ incident, but it doesn't make him any less intimidating.

Izuku is abruptly aware of every pair of eyes in the room, because they're all pointing straight at him. "Uh, y-yeah, but, I swear I didn't bring her on purpose. She must've slipped out and followed me here, and by the time I noticed, I was already outside and it was too late to take her back… so…" His voice trails off.

"Aren't you *pretty*." Hagakure's voice makes him jump; he hadn't even noticed her come up. Now she's crouching in front of Mika and… petting her, Izuku assumes. It's a little hard to tell when Izuku can only see the position of her clothes. "Midoriya, what's her name?"

"Uh, Mika, but—"

"Hi there, little Mika." Hagakure's thoroughly charmed, and some of

the other kids are coming closer.

Ashido pops in, one hand braced on Hagakure's shoulder. "Ooh ooh, let me pet her next!"

The look that Aizawa gives him is nothing short of long-suffering, and Izuku kind of wants to die, just a little. Rei, Uraraka, and Kirishima certainly aren't helping by laughing at him.

"Oh you poor thing!" Ashido pipes up again, cooing to Mika as she gives the cat a scratch under the chin. "Midoriya, what happened to her eye?"

"I don't really know." Izuku fidgets. "She was like that when I found her? And she was in the shelter for a while, and no one adopted her, so I just…"

This brings a chorus of "aaawww"s from the girls, plus a few of the boys.

"No wonder she loves you so much!" Uraraka adds, and Izuku covers his face with both hands.

A heavy, world-weary sigh forces him to look up again, just in time to see Aizawa stoop, hook one hand under his cat, and scoop her up in a loose, one-armed cradle. She's immediately enamored with his scarf, batting at it and trying into crawl into the folds. Aizawa shifts her away and, with practiced ease, settles her more comfortably against his chest. He reaches into his pocket, rustles something, pulls out a cat treat, and feeds it to her.

A memory comes to Izuku then, of a conversation he'd once had with All-Might. *Aizawa fosters shelter cats.*

"The first event starts in less than twenty minutes," Aizawa says flatly. "There won't be much of a break before the second event, but there will be between—" Mika interrupts him with the purriest, most musical meow Izuku has ever heard from her. Before Aizawa has the chance to continue, Mika slowly reaches up and, right in front of the entire class, gently boops him on the nose with her paw.

Izuku realizes in that moment that his cat is a giant suck-up.

"—between the second and third," Aizawa finishes, as if that didn't just happen. "You can collect your cat then."

Somehow Izuku finds his voice. “What would I do with her during the third event?” he asks cautiously.

Aizawa gives him a very unimpressed look. “You should probably worry about making it that far first, Midoriya.”

“Right.” The floor draws Izuku’s gaze again, and before he can recover, Aizawa is already walking out the door with Mika comfortable and purring in his arms.

Laughter ripples throughout the rest of the class. Izuku sways a little on his feet and wonders how much a medically-induced coma goes for these days.

“See?” Uraraka gives him a hearty pat on the shoulder. She’s still giggling at him, just a little. “I told you it’d work out!”

“Uraraka,” Izuku says faintly.

“Yeah, Deku?”

“Please launch me into the sun.”

Uraraka only laughs harder.

Miraculously, his classmates return to talking amongst themselves and making final preparations for the festival. Everyone is dressed for gym class; since all departments will be participating, and not just Heroics, hero costumes and gear are banned from the events. Gradually, the minutes tick by, and the last of Class 1-A trickles in. Izuku drifts to the edge of the room for one last word with Rei.

Remember, just watch from the sidelines, he tells her, hoping that his signing looks like nervous hand-wringing to any casual observer.

Rei pouts. *Why?*

It’s not real fighting, Izuku says. *It’s like the entrance exam. It’s a contest. You don’t have to protect me.*

What if the bully grabs you?

It’ll be fine, he insists, frowning as he signs. *If I do fight him it would just be a sparring match. I’m not in danger, so you don’t have to guard me.*

Rei scowls darkly at him. *If the bully tries to hurt you, I’ll scare him off.*

It's going to be okay, he says. *Just watch, and cheer me on.*

Fine, she says, disgruntled. *But if I see something I don't like, I'm going to stop it, no matter what you say.* It's probably the best he's going to get out of her.

"Midoriya."

Izuku doesn't actually recognize the voice addressing him until he turns around and finds himself looking at a familiar scarred face with mismatched eyes. Somewhere in his brain, his fight-or-flight instincts give him a polite little mental nudge. "Uh, what is it, Todoroki?" It's a little difficult to talk when his throat tightens on instinct, so he has to force the words out. It's not his fault; Yuuei is miles better than his previous schools, and it's wonderful to have friends, but when classmates with uncomfortably powerful quirks notice that he exists, it usually doesn't end well for him.

The first thing Todoroki Shouto ever says to him, besides his name, is "Objectively, I think I'm above you in terms of practical strength."

For a moment, Izuku can only stare at him blankly, as if Todoroki just spoke to him in Welsh or something. When he finds his voice, he can only stammer defensively. "Well, I don't know, I mean, I think I've been… yeah. Yeah you're probably right."

"You've managed to get All-Might's eyes on you, right?" Todoroki says.

Izuku chokes on the air he's breathing, and tries to disguise it as clearing his throat. He can feel Rei clutching at the hem of his gym shirt.

"I'm not going to pry," Todoroki continues. His eyes never leave Izuku's, but for the life of him Izuku can't read a single thing from him. No anger, no animosity, not even that much determination. He's just… cold. Everything about him is cold, from his eyes to his face to his voice as he finishes what he means to say. "But I'm going to beat you."

Izuku feels his stomach drop.

"Whoa-ho!" Kaminari calls over from one of the tables. "Did the strongest kid in class just throw down the gauntlet?"

Izuku would like to sink into the floor again. Even as Kirishima comes

to his defense, he can't help the dread that churns in his stomach.

"What's with you, man?" Kirishima is saying, nudging Todoroki's shoulder none too gently. "You can't just spring this on him right before we go out. Not cool."

"I'm not here to play nice or make friends, but whatever," Todoroki says flatly.

"Is this because I elbowed you by accident that one time?" Izuku blurts. "Because I said I was sorry."

Todoroki gives him a withering look. "No."

"Oh. Okay. Uh. Good." For a split second, Izuku is tongue-tied. All his anxieties are crashing in like a wave—after two weeks of keeping his worries at bay, a boy who has never spoken to him and barely looked at him since the start of school has managed to drag him face-first right through them. It really isn't fair. What does Todoroki have against him?

At that moment, Rei pushes forward. Still clutching the hem of Izuku's shirt, she scowls up at Todoroki, sticks out her tongue, and blows the loudest, wettest raspberry that Izuku has ever had the pleasure of hearing.

Izuku blinks, and suddenly he doesn't have to worry about possibly getting his teeth kicked in by Todoroki, because he's too busy trying not to laugh or look like he might be about to laugh. He bites his lip to keep from grinning as Rei—his own personal invisible cheerleader—pulls rude faces and ruder signs at Todoroki.

He feels, at least for the moment, that he's been jarred into a better headspace. He's still nervous, still worried, but—calmer.

"I don't know what this is about," he says at length, tearing his eyes away from Rei and back to Todoroki's face. "I don't really know you, or what your problem is with me, but I guess that doesn't really matter, because it's not like I can do anything about it. All I can do is maybe fight you. Maybe."

"Little pessimistic there, Midoriya," Kirishima mutters.

Izuku shrugs. "That's what I was going to do anyway. So if you're going to come at me with all your strength, then I hope you're ready for the same." And then Izuku tries something. He releases his lower

lip from his teeth, digs deep into all his worries and misgivings and constant lingering fear, tilts his head a little, and smiles at Todoroki. “So I guess we’ll see who’s stronger, won’t we?”

There’s a chorus of “oohhhhh” from some of the others, including but not limited to Kirishima, Uraraka, Sero, and Kaminari. For a split second, the cold expression on Todoroki’s face seems to waver.

“I’m definitely seeing it,” Izuku hears Uraraka mutter to Tsuyu. “Baby-eating smile. That was kind of awesome.”

Tsuyu grins. “Right?”

There’s no time to talk after that. Their cue comes to make their way outside, and Izuku ends up near the head of the pack with Iida as they step out into the sunlight in a packed stadium. His heart pounds in his chest, but it’s not fear, and it’s not nerves.

For the first time in his life, he’s surrounded by people who aren’t just gleefully waiting for him to fail. They want to beat him, yes. They all want to win and that means beating him, among other things. But they’re not looking down on him, mocking him as the weak one—they’re eye to eye, and they see him as a rival and a threat. They see him not as someone to beat up, but someone to beat.

His mother is watching from home, his teacher—his idol—is watching from the faculty seats, and his best friend will be watching from the sidelines.

He’s never felt like this before.

It’s definitely something he could get used to.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Hope everyone's having a wonderful Christmas!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By the end of the first and second events of the Yuuei Sports Festival, two things have become abundantly clear to Izuku. First, the universe is out to get him. And second, so is Todoroki Shouto.

Not that he hadn't already known; Todoroki made his intentions clear, and the universe hasn't pulled any punches lately. But both points have since been upgraded from educated hypotheses to valid, replicable theories.

To be fair to Todoroki, Izuku manages to place first in the footrace, which earns him the ten-million-point headband in the second event, so by then, *everyone* is out to get him.

Which really only proves the first point.

As for the second point… well.

Izuku has seen Todoroki in battle exactly once, during the incident at the USJ. It's not something he's likely to forget; his classmate *froze* that monster of a Noumu, so thoroughly that two of its limbs broke off.

Its *limbs*. *Fell off*.

The monster had been left writhing and flopping on the ground like an oversized fish before its regeneration quirk regrew the missing arm and leg.

He missed Todoroki's performance in All-Might's Heroes Vs. Villains game, but he heard about it plenty from his classmates. In that case, Todoroki had frozen the entire building, trapping both his opponents and winning the exercise single-handed. He hadn't even *needed* Shouji's help.

But not once has Izuku ever seen or heard of Todoroki using fire, until his classmate pulls it out during the cavalry battle. The one time Izuku's ever seen fire from him, and it's right in Izuku's face. In one

fell swoop, Izuku almost loses both his eyebrows and the tournament.

But, by some miracle (namely Tokoyami's quick thinking), he and the rest of his team manage to squeak into the third event. Izuku barely finishes his sigh of relief when a familiar rattling shriek grates in his ears.

No longer content on the sidelines, Rei comes barreling through the rest of his classmates and crashes into his side with an earsplitting wail of glee. Izuku staggers with the impact and manages to keep his footing only by smacking into someone before he can fall over.

"Sorry!" he blurts as he regains his balance and tries to gather the shreds of his dignity. Rei, the little menace, clings to him with her arms around his middle and giggles fit to burst.

"Deku, are you okay?" Uraraka's at his side in an instant, steadying him with a hand on his shoulder. "Did you get hurt in the cavalry battle? What's wrong?"

Izuku forces a laugh. "Haha, nothing! Nothing at all, just… ground's uneven. I slipped. I'm fine. Thanks, Uraraka."

She beams at him, a little amused now that she knows he isn't hurt. "Well, be more careful, okay?"

Izuku pastes a smile on his face and forces a laugh. "Haha, right." At that moment, Iida calls Uraraka's attention away. Flushed with embarrassment, Izuku cringes and turns to glance at whoever had the misfortune of preventing his fall. "I'm really sorry about that, are you o… kay…?" The smile on his face freezes, and the words die in his throat.

Todoroki's glaring at him like he's trying to wield his quirk through his eyes.

Rei's arms tighten around his midriff, and she offers a quiet warning growl that Todoroki has no way of hearing.

"Th-that was an accident," Izuku blurts, because he doesn't need any special power to feel the hostility wafting off of Todoroki. It might be cold—too cold to mistake for Bakugou's hot temper—but Izuku still finds himself shrinking away, still shoves his hands behind his back to hide the shaking. He shouldn't feel afraid like this, he tells himself. This isn't Bakugou. However strong Todoroki is, they're on even ground here. He shouldn't feel like this. But with Todoroki looking at

him like Izuku's personally affronted him somehow, it's difficult to feel anything but small.

Rei's growling gets a little louder.

"L-look, I…" Izuku stammers. "I mean, no hard f—"

"A word, if you don't mind," Todoroki cuts him off.

"Uh, sure?" Izuku brushes his hand lightly against Rei's shoulder, curling and uncurling his fingers so it will look more like a nervous tic. "What is it?"

"Privately," Todoroki says. With a jerk of his head, he walks off.

For a moment, Izuku considers blowing him off and joining in on the conversation between Iida and Uraraka. He glances down at Rei, and finds her frowning after his classmate. But it's not the usual scowl she puts on when someone gives him a hard time; she looks like she doesn't know what to make of Todoroki, either.

With a sigh, Izuku jogs to catch up to him.

My little brother has done well.

I was worried about him and I wanted to help him win the games, but I didn't need to worry after all. The bully didn't get a chance to hurt him, and my little brother was very smart, and very strong, and his other friends helped him.

I'm glad. It's good that he has friends who can help him better than I can. It's good that the bully couldn't touch him.

But this one, the one with the scar… I don't know this one. I don't like this one. He is cold, colder than me even though I am dead and he has fire on one side. He doesn't smile, not even a fake smile or a mean smile. The only times he talks, he says things that make my little brother feel afraid.

(Little brother is always afraid, every minute of every day. I can feel it on him, smell it on him. But he usually doesn't feel it unless the bully comes too close.)

I don't like it, and I don't like him. If he does anything bad to my little brother, if he does anything but talk, then I'll make ***him*** *feel fear.*

He takes my little brother to a quiet place, where no one is around to

overhear. He looks at my little brother for a long time, long enough for my little brother to be nervous.

You wanted to tell me something, *my little brother says.* What was it?

The one with the scar takes a long time to answer, long enough for me to want to ask questions, too. I don't like the look on his face. At least when the bully glares, I know what it means. I can feel it skin-deep, I'm-angry-I-hate-you-I-want-to-hurt-hurt-***hurt***, *but the one with the scar only feels cold. I try to feel harder and listen harder, but the cold is deep, deeper, deeper and deeper, like ice and death and loneliness—*

There.

I don't like what I find. Anger-hate-spite would be easy. It would mean the one with the scar is cruel and mean, just like the bully. It would mean I can chase him off and make him afraid, even if my little brother doesn't like it.

But the one with the scar does not have anger-hate-spite inside of him. Instead, there is cold, cold, cold, and then there is ***hurt.***

Not the want to hurt, like the bully. Just hurt. He hurts, he hurts, deep down under all the cold there is ***pain*** *and* ***fear*** *and* ***loneliness*** *and I cannot hate that because my little brother had that too. There is anger inside him, and hate too, but it is for someone else and he does not hate my little brother.*

You blindsided me, *the one with the scar says.* And I broke my own promise.

That means something to my little brother but not to me. My little brother knows that, and his hands move at his sides, speaking to me. He used his fire. No one felt it but me.

Is that why he's so cold? He has fire but he promised not to use it?

Hey, *the one with the scar says.* Are you All-Might's illegitimate child, or what?

My little brother panics. His hands fly and dance and wave, not saying anything, just like the words out of his mouth don't say anything, either, That's not it *and* You've got it all wrong *and other things that don't match what he feels. The things he feels are skin-deep, easy to read—fear and panic and embarrassment and shyness, but those are thin and weak as they float to the top. There are happier things underneath, hope and pleasure,* I-wish-I-wish-if-only-it-were-true. *There is love there, shy and*

quiet but warm, always warm. My little brother is always afraid, but if I reach deep enough beneath that fear, he is warm.

The one with the scar isn't warm like that. If he ever was, then something must have chased it out of him.

The way you said that, *the one with the scar says.* You said that's not it. So there is some connection that you can't talk about.

(My little brother feels the fear again.)

You know about my father, Endeavor, *the one with the scar tells him. (He's right—my little brother does know about him. My little brother told me so. He told me Endeavor has fire powers, just like my little brother's father does. And a long long long time ago, my little brother hoped and hoped that he might have fire too, and he might be strong like Endeavor. But instead his power is seeing me, and hearing me, and I'm glad my little brother didn't get his father's fire.)*

He's been the number two hero for a while now, *says the one with the scar.* If you're connected to the number one hero, then that means I need to win all the more.

I think that's a stupid reason. I think maybe the one with the scar thinks it's a stupid reason too, but he won't admit it because maybe there's so much cold in the way that he can't feel his own feelings, and he doesn't know how to dig deep like I can. Maybe I'll tell my little brother later, so he can tell the one with the scar how stupid he's being.

He'll do anything to advance his position, *the one with the scar says.* He made a name for himself, but it was never enough to surpass All-Might.

The cold is thinning. It's still deep and dark, but the things underneath are rising.

So he… *The one with the scar pauses, and I know it's because he's feeling all those things. The cold can't protect him forever.* He devised a plan.

My little brother is nervous now. A… plan? What are you saying, Todoroki?

The one with the scar answers with another question: Do you know what quirk marriages are?

My little brother is easy to read. It feels like his heart is dropping into his

stomach. I don't understand. What are quirk marriages?

Luckily, I don't need to ask my little brother, because the one with the scar explains. It's a practice from previous generations, *he says, and the pain-fear-anger-**hate-disgust-contempt** rises through the cold and dark, closer and closer to the top like bile and sick.* Choosing mates solely to enhance one's own quirk, to be inherited down the line, and forcing marriages for that purpose.

I hold on to my little brother's hand. I feel the churning in his stomach. I don't blame him. I don't like this story very much.

It was easy for my father to ingratiate himself to my mother's family, and take possession of her power. *The one with the scar talks like the cold is still there, deep and quiet and still, but it's not anymore. The pain is at the top. It hurts him to talk about this, and the hurt doesn't match the cold on his face and in his eyes.*

I understand now. I think I understand the one with the scar. He hides behind the cold, just like my little brother hides behind smiles.

That's why I was born, *the one with the scar says, only he's covering his scar with his hand.* He couldn't beat All-Might, so he decided to make a hero who could. *The cold breaks, like ice cracking, and he hurts, hurts, hurts.* To hell with him. I'll never be his tool!

Then why, *my little brother tries to say.*

In my memories, *the one with the scar says,* my mother is always crying.

My little brother is very smart. I wonder if he knows how much the one with the scar hurts. His fingers curl against his scar, and he hurts so much that I wonder how his face stays so cold. If I turn my head and listen, if I stay quiet enough, I can feel things in the hurt: loneliness and love and pain and why, why, why?

She told me my left side was ugly, *the one with the scar says, and I hide behind my little brother. The pain is so close, so strong that I can feel it too, and it hurts and stings and burns.*

And then, *says the one with the scar,* she poured boiling water on me.

The hurt breaks apart, and there's love and confusion and It's-not-her-fault-it-wasn't-her-fault-she was scared-scared-**scared**-so-scared-I'm-scared—

My little brother hurts now, too. He always hurts when people tell him their stories. I think it's because no one who needs to tell him stories ever has happy ones. Not the dead, and not even the living. I hope one day someone will have a happy story for him to hear.

The one with the scar lets his hand drop, and the hurt drops too. It sinks back down, deep deep down below the cold that he hides behind. There's fear now, along with the cold. He's scared. Looking at my little brother, he's scared and I don't know why.

Todoroki*, my little brother whispers, and he doesn't hide his hurt.*

The reason I'm aiming to beat you is as a personal triumph, *the one with the scar says.* I won't use his power for it. I'll become number one without needing to.

And then he turns to walk away. My little brother's feelings whirl around and around. If the one with the scar is deep and dark and cold like an ocean, then my little brother is like a wind storm, everything swirling together, everything confused, too many feelings to pick just one.

If you can't tell me anything, that's fine, *the one with the scar says as he walks away. The cold is back, too deep and dark for anyone to see the hurt.* Keep being All-Might's something-or-other. I'll climb over you using only my right side. Sorry I took your time.

The weird thing is, he is sort of sorry. Just not for taking time. But he isn't angry with my little brother. He doesn't hate my little brother. He doesn't even want to hurt him, not really. And that means I can't be angry at him or try to chase him off like the bully. He's too much like my little brother—if I was mean to him, then it wouldn't feel good.

Todoroki?

My little brother steps forward to follow him, and pity-sadness-hurt-horror swirl around him. There's… a lot that you don't know about me. That I couldn't tell you, even if I wanted. I don't know why you told me these things, but… thank you. And I'm sorry, for everything that's happened to you. It must have been awful. Whatever it was, you didn't deserve it.

The cold cracks again, and surprise leaks through, close enough to the top that it almost maybe shows on the face with the scar.

But there are things I need to do, too, *my little brother says.* There are people I owe, and I can't let them down. There are people watching

me. People who've helped me, and protected me, and I'm grateful but I'm tired of being protected. *He looks at me when he says this, and I grin at him, because I'm going to protect him no matter how strong he gets. His hands curl into fists, and the swirling cloud goes still and settles around him like a blanket. He doesn't smile. There's nothing to hide here.* So, this doesn't change what I said to you before. I'm going to beat you.

The feelings settle down, back the way they were. The one with the scar and his deep, deep cold and all the hurt that hides underneath it. My little brother and his fear that never quite goes away, because he's seen too much and heard too much to ever kill it.

Nana is ready to vibrate apart at the seams.

Is it possible for a ghost to simply dissipate into the ether from stress alone? For the first time in years, Nana thinks of her grave—a quiet little spot, calm and silent, probably overgrown by now unless Gran Torino has nothing better to do these days. She thinks of how nice it would be to just sink beneath the earth and *sleep*—not cross over, no, but simply hide away in the dark and let the world turn without her for a while.

Her problem starts when Toshi first sets foot in the stadium, and Nana is almost trampled by a crowd of restless, dead-eyed spirits. She's only bewildered at first, but their agitation is contagious enough that she starts to feel it, too.

Watching Izuku keep his head above water in the competition is a welcome distraction, but she's still spent hours stewing in a positive feedback loop of nerves by the time Part Two of her problem rears its ugly head.

She loves Toshi, she really does. She is so proud of him and it's a joy to watch him work and fight and *live*, but sometimes her boy is an oblivious lunk who couldn't read the atmosphere if it was written on a billboard.

"For God's sake, Toshi, learn to read body language," she whispers as Toshi bounds up to Todoroki Enji like he's greeting an old friend, and Endeavor tenses from head to toe and looks at him like he's calculating how much fire it will take to burn him to a crisp.

"No use whining about it," someone scoffs. Nana edges to the side and spots the speaker, the ghost of a man in his late twenties. He's in a suit, but his tie is loose and his shirt is half untucked. Judging by the

frown lines, the sour look on his face is probably permanent.

“What do you mean?” Nana eyes Endeavor suspiciously as Toshi greets him, heedlessly cheery in the face of his fellow hero’s poorly-disguised hostility.

“We’re *dead*,” the ghost points out. “Not like they can hear us if we yell at them for being stupid. What’re you following him around for?”

Nana bridles a little. “I knew him when I was alive,” she says. “I died when he was a kid, and I’ve been watching over him ever since.” She looks at Endeavor. “What about you? How come you’re following *him* around?”

“For kicks.”

“What.”

The man gives her a bitter smile. “Lady, I’m dead. There’s nothing left of me but memories and how I feel about them. I’m following him around because he’s an asshole and I am literally made of spite.”

Before Nana can answer, Toshi distracts her by cutting Endeavor off at the bottom of the stairs, just to ask him for teaching tips, of all things.

“I mean it, I want to know,” he says earnestly in the face of Endeavor’s scowl. “I could use some advice on raising the next generation of heroes!”

The ghost laughs raucously. “Trust me, man, you’re asking the wrong person!”

Nana scowls at him as Endeavor blows Toshi off. “What was that you were saying about them not being able to hear us?”

He shrugs sullenly. “Gotta blow off steam somehow. Wouldn’t want to end up like Okumura.”

“Who?”

“The poltergeist.”

“What poltergeist?” Nana has to force patience at this point.

“Pfft.” The ghost scoffs. “You mean you haven’t noticed everybody quietly crapping themselves? Okumura’s been a ticking time bomb ever since he started following this dickhead around.” He jerks a

thumb at Endeavor. “Never met a poltergeist before him. When we got here he pissed off somewhere else, and all the dead have been in a tizzy ever since. Suzuki went out to try and find him, but—hell with that. He’s mad enough to rip anyone apart if they get too close. So maybe watch out for him.” The conversation between Toshi and Endeavor is at an end, with Endeavor storming off. “Welp, gotta go. Watch out for Okumura.”

“Sure, thanks,” Nana says sourly. “What’re you gonna do?”

“I’m gonna hope the Dynamic Dickhead orders a drink at some point so I can knock it over the second he puts it down,” the ghost says dryly. “Don’t look at me like that, not everybody gets to follow around their phenomenally successful loved ones. See you around, lady. See if you can get your buddy to find better friends.” With that, both he and Endeavor are gone.

While Toshi takes a moment to collect himself, Nana takes a deep breath and lets it out.

So. Poltergeist on the loose. That explains a lot. The kiddo’s probably going to want to know, but at the same time he’s got a festival to focus on.

...Wouldn’t hurt to warn him a bit, though.

Izuku wanders back to the others in a fog, making it back barely in time to catch the assignments for the festival’s third events. There’s some shuffling in the participants; a few of the winners of the cavalry battle opt out, including Ojiro, and when all is said and done, Midnight displays the placement chart for all to see. Izuku squints to find his name, standing on tiptoe until Rei helpfully whisks herself up to point for him. Then, with a concerned rattling noise, she points to another name nearby.

A lump forms in Izuku’s throat, and it takes a moment or two for him to swallow it. If he wins the first round, he may very well be facing Todoroki in the second.

“That’s sooner than I expected,” he mutters to her when she returns to his side. He takes a deep breath. “No use worrying about him just yet. Looks like my first opponent is… Shinsou. General Education, wasn’t he?” His stomach turns with unease. Ojiro was on Shinsou’s team in the cavalry battle, and he opted out for some reason. Izuku doesn’t know much about Shinsou, besides the fact that he’s one of the many

students looking to beat Class 1-A. That means he also doesn't know what Shinsou's quirk is.

Rei points, and Izuku follows her finger to see Shinsou passing behind him. The other boy looks tired, his eyes sunken and shadowed, though Izuku supposes that he's not in any position to judge.

"It's you, right?" Shinsou says. Somehow his tone of voice is even flatter than Todoroki's. "Midoriya Izuku?"

Izuku is about to answer when Ojiro comes up from behind and gags him with his tail. The blond tail tuft goes right into his open mouth.

"Midoriya," Ojiro says sharply, as Shinsou walks away smirking. "Don't answer anything he says." Before Izuku can ask what he means by that, Ojiro drags him off to one of the side rooms.

He has to shoulder his way through nervous ghosts. Rei growls and shows her teeth to clear the way for him, but still the hairs on the back of his neck are standing on end by the time he and Ojiro are somewhere quiet. Nervousness makes his mouth quicker, eager to distract himself from whatever has the dead in a panic.

"That was—honest of you," he blurts out as he sits down by his classmate.

Ojiro blinks. "Huh?"

"Bowing out of the competition like that," Izuku says. "Instead of just… I don't know… going with it."

"I thought about it." Ojiro looks away, sheepish. "But… really, it didn't feel right." He fidgets a little in his seat. "The whole point of the second round was to see who was good enough to advance. If I can't even remember what I did to pass, then I have no way of knowing if I really was good enough."

"I understand," Izuku says. "Sort of. I mean… the only part I don't understand is why you don't remember."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about," Ojiro says. His face turns grim. "It was that kid from Gen Ed. Shinsou. He has some kind of mind control quirk."

Izuku's stomach turns. As soon as the recreational events are over, he's going to have to face this kid in a fight. "Mind control," he echoes,

voice faint.

“That’s why I stopped you from talking to him,” Ojiro goes on. “Like I said, I don’t remember anything from the actual cavalry battle. The last thing I remember was Shinsou talking to me. I answered him, and that’s where my memories stop. I’ll bet you anything that’s how his quirk works—if you answer something he says, he can take control of you.”

Izuku buries his face in his hands, fingers tangling in his own hair. “Okay. All right, so that means—I just have to keep my mouth shut. Shouldn’t be hard, now that I know.”

“That’s not all,” Ojiro continues. “During the battle, one of the kids on another team bumped me pretty hard, enough for it to hurt. That’s where my memories start up again. So if you do get controlled, you’d need something like that to break free.” He sits back. “That’s all I know. …Hope it helps.”

Izuku takes a deep breath that hitches a little. Ojiro is another classmate who barely knows him. But here he is, giving Izuku vital information that could very well save his skin in his first fight. “It does. It really does.” He manages a smile, and this one does reach his eyes. “Thanks, Ojiro. You didn’t have to do this.”

“Sure I did.” Ojiro snorts. “He turned me into a puppet, remember? Call me petty, but I kind of want to see him lose.” He turns to Izuku with a lopsided grin. “So… beat him for me, will you?”

Izuku grins back. “You got it.”

They part ways, and Izuku wanders off to clear his head. Rei vanishes on ahead, and Izuku lets her go. Now that he remembers, he might as well find his way to the booth where Aizawa and Present Mic are, so he can check on Mika and maybe figure out what to do with her if Aizawa doesn’t want to watch her anymore. Plenty of his classmates will be sitting out the next event. Kouda’s one of them; he might not mind.

Izuku is halfway there, tense and hurrying in the midst of nervous ghosts, when a familiar voice rings out and makes him jump.

“There you are!” Ms. Shimura swoops into view, waving to him. All-Might is nowhere to be seen. “I’ve been looking for you. Listen, there’s a poltergeist wandering around.”

“We *noticed*,” one of the ghostly passersby grouses before moving on. Ms. Shimura ignores him.

“I, uh, sort of figured,” Izuku answers, with a glance around to make sure no one can hear. “Do you know something about them?”

“It’s a him, I think,” Ms. Shimura says. “Did you know that Todoroki Enji has ghosts following him?”

At Endeavor’s name, Izuku’s gut twists. Just the sound of it feels like a punch in the stomach. “I, uh. No.”

“Well, just one ghost right now. Didn’t get his name, but he was kind of a jerk.” Ms. Shimura glances around. “But apparently one of the ghosts on Endeavor was mad enough to go poltergeist, and he’s wandering around scaring everyone.” Her blank eyes turn back to Izuku. “Kiddo, listen. I saw the board—play your cards right, and you’ll be fighting Todoroki in round two, right? You need to watch yourself, because there’s… something funny about his dad.”

“I know,” Izuku says quietly.

“Oh good, then—wait, you do?” Ms. Shimura blinks at him. “Well, anyway, just watch out for that kid. I don’t trust his dad. Can’t quite put my finger on why, beyond him acting like an asshole, but… dunno what the means for his kid.”

Izuku does.

“Do you know where the poltergeist is?” he asks.

“Huh? No. I know his name’s Okumura and he’s probably pissed off because of Endeavor, but beyond that, nothing.”

Izuku checks the time on his phone. “Bet I can find him before I have to go out.”

“Half-pint, are you *serious*—?”

“I’ve got nothing better to do,” Izuku says. “I just have to go get Mika and then—”

Mrrrow.

Honestly, Izuku’s not sure why he bothers being surprised anymore.

He turns to look in the direction he’d been heading before, and finds

his cat once again trotting at Rei's heels. They both look quite pleased with themselves, and vaguely Izuku wonders if Aizawa knows she wandered off.

Well, nothing for it.

"Thanks, Rei," he says. "We've got some time before the third event. Want to help me find an angry ghost?"

Rei's smile is a touch wider than a human mouth has any business being. Izuku takes that as a yes.

Chapter End Notes

CW: discussions of canonical child abuse.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Thanks everyone for being so patient!

Also, I have some lovely fanart to show you: a couple of creepy-awesome Izukus and some adorable Reis. Thank you, Rene-Elric and BrushstrokeApocalyptic!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ms. Shimura heaves a sigh. “I wonder if Toshi really realizes how much of a handful you are,” she mutters, crossing her arms. “Well, he’s safe enough here that I don’t need to watch him. Lead the way, kiddo. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you work before.”

“Oh, well, there isn’t much to it,” Izuku says with a shrug. “Rei, can you find him?”

She nods vigorously.

“Wait, what? That’s it?” Ms. Shimura blinks. “I’m confused, did she go out and look for him before?”

“Uh, no.” Izuku looks to Rei for confirmation. His friend shakes her head and shrugs. “That’s why we have to look for him now.” Rei stands in place for a few moments more, cocking her head this way and that with a frown on her face. Finally, she drifts off down the hall, back in the direction they came. Izuku scoops Mika up off the ground and follows.

“Oh.” Ms. Shimura falls in step with him. “Okay then. So… what’s the process, though? How’s she know where to go?”

Izuku frowns, confused by the question. “Well… it’s a poltergeist.”

“…Yeah?”

“They tend to be pretty angry, as a general rule of thumb,” Izuku goes on.

“…And?”

“It’s… pretty simple,” Izuku says. “She just does that… that sensing thing.”

Ms. Shimura stares at him, looking baffled. “What sensing thing?”

“You know, where you just… feel for emotions?”

“I don’t follow.”

“…Oh.” Izuku turns back to look at Rei. She’s always had a strong level of empathy; he’s never been able to hide his feelings from her. Years of seeing her and communicating with her has shown him that it’s not just a matter of reading the mood; she can sense these things in people. Izuku’s always assumed it was just a ghost thing, but if Ms. Shimura can’t do it, then… maybe it’s just a Rei thing. “Well, it’s something she can do. I just figured… other ghosts are always so nervous when there are poltergeists around, so I thought everyone was doing it.”

“Kiddo, other ghosts are nervous when there are poltergeists around because poltergeists are both strong and usually crazy,” Ms. Shimura says bluntly. “Like that one at the beach, back before you started school. The second I was in reach, it tried to tear me a new asshole.”

“She,” Izuku says.

“What?”

“She.” His voice is much quieter when he repeats it. “Her name was Sachi.”

“Oh.” Ms. Shimura’s face and voice soften. “Right. Is she…?”

“She’s gone,” he says. “She moved on. No one can ever hurt her again.”

Ms. Shimura doesn’t ask him anything after that, so Rei leads them onward in silence. For all that his best friend is quiet, Izuku can’t help but notice how nervous she is. Her hair stirs, as does the hem of her white nightgown. Izuku can feel the tension spiking off her, sending chills up the length of his spine. A quick glance at Ms. Shimura tells him that she’s feeling it too.

Before long, he starts to hear it, and feel it. It’s colder here, so much so that Izuku half expects to start seeing his breath. Incoherent whispering emanates from the walls, sounds that can’t just be noises

in the plumbing or the walls. More shivers tell him that they're headed in the right direction. What's more, he knows the sounds aren't coming from anyone living, because by now they're beyond the hallways and areas that any of the students, faculty, or spectators would use. Living people are avoiding this place.

So are the dead, apparently. Besides the three of them and the cat, there's no one here.

And then, in a heartbeat, there is.

Rei hisses at the sudden apparition—she doesn't like surprises. This one comes in the form of a woman that Izuku has never seen before. She doesn't look much like a poltergeist; mostly she just looks… worried? Scared? Normal, mainly. He can't tell how she died just by looking at her, and with poltergeists he can *always* tell. They wear that sort of thing on their sleeve, if there's anything left of them that remembers who they used to be.

"Oh dear," she frets. "Oh dear—please go back. Don't go this way." She addresses Rei and Ms. Shimura when she talks. "Please, if there's any way you can warn him—"

"I can hear you," he tells her, and she lets out a small 'eep' in surprise. "There's a poltergeist this way, isn't there? Can you tell me what's wrong? I'd like to help if I can."

Her blank eyes are as round as saucers as she looks at him. "I… oh." She hesitates. "I, um." After a moment of dithering, she looks to Ms. Shimura for help.

"He's used to this kind of thing, apparently," Ms. Shimura tells the ghost. "This isn't his first rodeo." She pauses, then snaps her fingers. "If you don't mind me asking, your name wouldn't happen to be Suzuki, would it?"

"How did you—oh." Suzuki blinks. "Did you talk to Hino?"

"Who?" Izuku pipes up.

"I think I did," Ms. Shimura says. "He's the douche in the suit, right?"

Suzuki winces. "Sorry about him. Anyway—listen. You… don't want to be here right now. I've been warning everyone off so far, just to make sure Okumura doesn't hurt anyone, but beyond that there's not much I can do. He won't listen on the best of days, and right now…"

Fear flashes across her face. “I’d really rather not get near him, to be honest with you.”

As if on cue, a shriek rattles the surrounding walls. The voice barely sounds human, and sends prickles spider-crawling along Izuku’s shoulders. He shrugs the feeling away.

“Do you know why he’s upset?” he asks.

The reply comes instantaneously, but not from Suzuki. Something slams, like a door banging open, and Izuku barely has time to blink before something carries him off his feet. His back hits the wall with enough force to rattle his teeth, and he shuts his eyes as a poltergeist howls its fury an inch from his face. Icy, clawlike fingers curl into the fabric of his gym uniform. Off to the side, mostly drowned out by the poltergeist’s yelling, Suzuki cries out for it to leave Izuku alone.

He feels Rei’s familiar answering shriek like a physical pressure on his eardrums, and the poltergeist is abruptly yanked away from him. It—he—Okumura?—had been holding him at least a few inches higher than Izuku’s normal height would have allowed, and once released, he slides down the wall until he touches the floor. He opens his eyes to find that Ms. Shimura has placed herself in front of him while Rei and the unfamiliar poltergeist tousle in the center of the hallway. Shadows twist along the wall, and the nearest lights flicker. One of them sputters out entirely. At his feet, Mika presses herself against his ankles and hisses.

A proper deep breath takes two tries to accomplish, but eventually Izuku manages to get his stuttering chest under control. “Ms. Shimura,” he says, once he can trust his own voice again. “Keep watch, will you? Let me know if someone’s coming. Someone alive.”

“Kiddo, I don’t think—”

Izuku pitches his voice a little louder as he steps around Ms. Shimura. “Rei?” A pale face, features dripping like candle wax, turns away from the equally malformed poltergeist and tilts quizzically to one side. Izuku smiles. “Thanks, Rei, but you can let him go now.” To the poltergeist, he says, “I just want to talk. Please don’t do that again? It upsets my friend, and when she gets upset, I can’t really tell her what to do.”

The twisted form flickers, and for the space of a blink Izuku can see the person that the poltergeist used to be. A few features stick in his head—dark, wavy hair, a pointed nose, and a grayish tint to the dead-

pale skin—before it goes back to swelling shadows and nightmares given form. Rei backs off, but she doesn't exactly back down. Izuku's glad that no one else is here, because he'd hate to wonder how much of this would be visible to someone who doesn't have his sight.

"Hello," Izuku says—maybe he should have opened with that. "My name's Midoriya. Would you like to talk?"

The reply is a mixture of spectral white noise and curse words.

"Whatever you're angry about," Izuku goes on, "I promise it won't be fixed by yelling at everyone here. It's Endeavor you're mad at, right?"

Pressure builds in his skull, as if he's suddenly been dropped miles beneath the earth. His ears ache from the strain, and he knows he's touched a nerve.

"**I'm *dead* because of him.**" Okumura's voice makes Izuku wince with pain.

"Ow. I'm sorry, that must have been awful—"

"**Shut the fuck up, you mealy-mouthed *brat*.**" Harsh words skim off of Izuku harmlessly. "**If I wanted someone patronizing me, I'd talk to fucking Hino.**"

"Sorry."

"**Don't get in my way,**" Okumura snarls.

"I don't plan on it," Izuku tells him, still steady. It's important to keep calm. Experience has taught him that poltergeists feed off of strong emotions from the living—fear and anger and grudges. "I'd like to help, if I can."

"**I don't need help from a little shit like you,**" Okumura snaps. "**As soon as that bastard dies, I'll tear his soul to shreds.**" Shadows billow, and for a moment Izuku wonders if the poltergeist will goad Rei into another fight. But then, in an instant, the shadows vanish and take the poltergeist with them, and the hallway is quiet once more.

"Well that could have gone better." Ms. Shimura sounds… not scared, exactly. Anxious. Maybe even a little frazzled.

"Not really," Izuku says. "It takes more than one conversation to fix this kind of thing. I'll keep working at it if I catch any free time."

“You’ll *keep working at it*?” Suzuki echoes, sounding incredulous. “You’re joking, right? He almost took your face off!”

“It’s okay,” Izuku assures her, as Rei returns to normal and crouches down to pet Mika. “He’s just mad. It happens. Do you know what his problem is? It’ll take longer to coax it out of him.”

“I don’t really know details,” she says slowly. She’s staring at him like she has no idea what to make of him, which is also pretty normal.

“He said Endeavor killed him,” Izuku says. “Or caused his death, at least.”

“Oh, well… it wasn’t direct, or in cold blood, I don’t think,” Suzuki tells him. “It was… oh, I’d have to talk to Hino. Hino was already with Endeavor when Okumura joined him, I think. I didn’t come into all this until recently.” Her form flickers in and out of view, which is like the ghostly version of fidgeting.

“What about you?” Izuku asks. “If you don’t mind me asking. Why did you join them?” *If you’re so scared of Okumura,* he doesn’t say.

“Well… it’s…” More fidgeting. “It’s hard to say it out loud without it sounding silly. And—rash.”

“I won’t judge,” Izuku promises her.

“I don’t even know them,” she sighs. “Hardly at all. I babysat some of the older ones once or twice, when I was alive. I must have seen something then, something that didn’t quite register. So after I died, I paid a visit. On a whim. And I just kept coming back.”

“What drew you?”

“It’s—” One last false start, and the ghost seems to steady herself. “Oh, I don’t know why I stay. I don’t know what I’d do if it ever came to it. But it’s that boy of his. His youngest.”

“Todoroki Shouto?” Izuku blinks. “What about him?”

“Like I said,” Suzuki sighs. “I don’t know what I expect to do about it. But part of me can’t help wondering if he won’t kill that boy one day. Either by accident or by driving him to do something reckless, or… I don’t know. It’s such an unhappy place, that house. I should leave—it has nothing to do with me—but that poor boy’s just so alone.”

Izuku's hands curl into fists at his sides.

"I'm sorry I can't be more helpful," Suzuki sighs. "I'll try to talk to Hino—talk to me later, maybe? If you can find a way to do something about Okumura, that would be a weight off my head."

"I'll do my best," Izuku says softly. "Thank you, Ms. Suzuki."

Before he can think of anything else to say, Ms. Shimura appears at his side—he never even noticed her leave. "Voice down, shorty," she warns. "Toshi's coming."

Izuku waves a quick goodbye to Suzuki before she disappears, and familiar footsteps announce All-Might's arrival. A moment before his teacher appears around the corner, Izuku drops to a crouch and pets Mika.

"Oh, there you are," All-Might says, upon seeing him. "It's getting on to the tournament event, my boy. What are you doing back here?"

"Just looking for somewhere quiet," he says, as Mika pushes her head into his hand. "Lost track of time, sorry." All-Might steps closer, and his cat trots over to purr like truck engine and wind her way around his ankles.

"Goodness, hello." All-Might stoops carefully to pet her, before straightening again with a grunt of effort. Izuku wonders how strong his true form is; he has to have some physical power to house One For All, but he looks so… *rickety* like this. "You aren't late yet," All-Might assures him. "There's still time to walk. I was just a bit worried when you weren't with any of the others." He holds out a hand as Izuku scoops up his cat and follows. The hand comes to rest lightly on Izuku's shoulder. "So. Nervous?"

"A little, yeah," Izuku says. He remembers the warnings he's been given—Ojiro's advice about Shinsou, and his conversation with Todoroki. "But it's like the entrance exam. There's no way for me to be any more prepared for it than I already am."

"Good." All-Might squeezed lightly.

They walk together in silence through the halls, Rei and Ms. Shimura drifting along with them. Suzuki is nowhere to be seen; she's probably gone off to find Okumura or Hino. Whether or not he wins this fight, he's going to have to find her later. Okumura seems to hate Endeavor, but the thought of any one of his classmates living so close to such a

volatile spirit doesn't sit well with Izuku.

"By the way," All-Might says suddenly. "Awkward question, but—" He points an inquisitive finger at Mika.

Izuku feels his face flush with embarrassment. "Right. Um." He hugs Mika closer to his chest, adjusting her in his arms when she bats at his chin. "My cat followed me here. Aizawa-sensei was watching her for the first two events, but…" Hesitantly he raises his head to look at All-Might. "I hate to ask this—"

The look on his teacher's face is one of amusement rather than annoyance, so that's a relief. "Midoriya, do you need me to watch your cat for you while you compete?"

"If it's not too much trouble," Izuku says in a small voice. "I'm really sorry—"

All-Might interrupts him by chuckling out loud. The hand leaves his shoulder to give Mika's ear a scratch, and Izuku feels her purr against his chest. "She's a friendly little one, isn't she?"

"I've never met a person she doesn't like." They're nearing the central stadium, and Izuku can see people again—living and dead—though All-Might is careful to steer him away from the former. He's in his true form, and even though his chances of being recognized are low, people might ask uncomfortable questions. "She's never had a problem with being held, either," Izuku tells him. He feels shy as he looks up at All-Might. "You're sure you don't mind? I could probably find a side room to put her in, or ask Aizawa-sensei again."

Instead of answering, All-Might holds out his hands. Taking the hint, Izuku gently sets Mika in his arms. Even without his hero form, All-Might's proportions are way bigger than the average person—Izuku's only a little taller than his elbow. Mika can fit in his cupped hands, and she seems happy enough to do so. "I'll keep an eye on her, my boy. You focus on your match." He chuckles. "Who knows? Maybe if I run into Endeavor again, the sight of her will put him in a better mood."

"Oh." It's almost time for him to go out, but the opening here is too good to pass up. "Was he in a bad mood before?"

"Endeavor can be… difficult." All-Might shifts his arms to cradle Mika more comfortably, and she slips free of his hands to hook her claws into his jacket and climb to his shoulder. "He's a fine hero, but not the

most personable."

"I see." The memory of Todoroki's tense face flashes at the forefront of Izuku's mind, and he blinks it away. Todoroki made it sound like Endeavor hated All-Might. "Do you get along with him?" he asks. "I mean, you're Number One and he's Number Two, so, do you at least work together a lot?"

"We did, but…" All-Might's voice trails off. "Well, it was quite a while ago. I've been traveling a lot in recent years, so I've lost touch with many of my acquaintances." He reaches up to pet the cat on his shoulder. "One benefit to my current teaching position, I hope—I'd like to reconnect with old colleagues. As for whether or not Endeavor and I get along, well… our positions being what they are, we're both well-suited to fighting solo, so we haven't had many opportunities for collaboration. But I respect him a great deal as a hero, and I like to think he does as well, in his own way. I think Japan is lucky to have him."

"Jesus Christ," Ms. Shimura mutters. "Hey, short stack? Endeavor hates him. And I mean, *hates* him. And he's an asshole."

Izuku nods in response to both of them. The entrance to the stadium is just up ahead, and All-Might finally comes to a halt.

"Young Midoriya," he begins. Then he pauses, long enough to fix Izuku with a deep, considering look. Izuku returns it steadily, wondering what his mentor might be thinking. At last, All-Might gives him a little smile and clasps his shoulder one last time. "Show them what you're capable of, my boy. Make sure they pay attention."

"Yes, sir." Steeling himself, he turns toward the stadium entrance and walks.

"Did you hear what the brain-dead monkey said earlier?" Shinsou asks, loudly enough to be heard across the ring. "He talked big about pride, but it was pretty stupid of him throw out his chances like that, huh?"

Izuku opens his mouth to tell Shinsou exactly where he can shove it, and barely catches himself when Rei shrieks at him from the sidelines. He shuts his mouth so quickly that he almost bites his tongue, and shoots Shinsou what feels like the ugliest glare he's ever given anyone.

"What?" Shinsou smirks. "It's true. There're people who'd kill for half

the chance I gave him, and he flushed it away without a thought. Pretty high and mighty of him, that's all."

That's his strategy, Izuku thinks. *He's gonna bait me into talking so he can brainwash me right out of the ring.* He purses his lips, curls his hands into fists, and takes a step to close the distance between them. It'd be better to end this quickly before he can slip up, but he has no idea what Shinsou's capable of, physically. Better not underestimate him.

Shinsou's on his guard now, circling instead of advancing, forcing Izuku to match his movements to keep him from getting behind him. "Must be nice for somebody like you," he says. "With a quirk like that, you must've been born with 'hero' stamped across your ass."

Izuku bites his lip.

"And there's all of you in heroics, running around like idiots 'cause you've got it made, while the rest of us have to dance and beg just to get noticed." Shinsou's shadowed eyes narrow. "What's that look for? What're you looking at me like *you're* the underdog for?" His teeth flash white as his lip curls back. "You're the golden boy, you've got a quirk like All-Might's second coming. You'd hardly even have to work to get noticed around here!'

If only you knew, Izuku almost says. It's a fight just to block Shinsou out.

"Nobody's ever gonna look at your quirk and say you're villain material!" Shinsou's voice rises. "Do you even *know* what that's like? Having your one dream thrown in your face just because you were born with the wrong kind of power?"

The words hit like a twisting in his heart.

His mouth moves without a command from his brain. It's pure habit, a meaningless platitude, a tiny little nothing of a word, but it slips out just as it's slipped out countless times before.

"Sorry," he says, before his brain catches up and realizes his mistake. "That must have been awf—"

His tongue locks in his mouth, and his body freezes in place from head to toe. *Shit,* he tries to say, but his mouth will no longer obey him. All he can do is stare, blankly, at Shinsou's triumphant smile.

"*Turn around,*" Shinsou tells him, and the command reverberates in his

head like an echo bouncing off the inside of his skull. "*Turn around and walk out of bounds.*"

Obediently, his legs respond. His body turns itself around and starts carrying him, step by step, toward the boundaries of the ring.

Izuku's head is not a fun place to be at the moment. All the vehement swearing he would be doing if he only had control of his mouth, is taking place in the confines of his mind.

Nice going, idiot. You had one job. One job! Just don't talk. Well, failed Step One. Nice work , Deku.

Maybe he should be worried that his inner voice sounds an awful lot like Bakugou right now.

Frustration wells up uselessly within him. He was supposed to prove himself here. He was supposed to announce his arrival, to attract Gran Torino's attention. And all he's going to do now is toddle stupidly out of the contest with a cockeyed look on his face.

Such a shame.

He was doing pretty well.

Too kind, that's the trouble.

No such thing.

Izuku blinks. That… didn't sound like any of his thoughts.

He's young. He'll learn from this.

Better to make this mistake here, instead of a real battle.

Better now than against my brother.

Anything we can do for him?

Yes.

A vision blooms before his eyes as he walks helplessly forward. Not ghosts—this is too hazy for ghosts. More like a mirage on the horizon, like a heat shimmer mixed with smoke and shadow. Izuku would react, would cry out, but he's not in control. Dark, indefinite shapes loom over him—eight of them—nine? Two of them look almost familiar.

He won't thank us.

It'll be a hard lesson.

But don't forget, he's had far worse.

He's almost to the edge when icy hands catch his arm. Izuku can't turn his head to look, but he recognizes the size of the hands, and the garbled whining growl. Rei drags at him, slowing his progress but not stopping it.

He focuses. He can't move his mouth. He can't speak.

But maybe… maybe if he focuses, and does his best…

The strain sends pain shooting through his head, but he does it. His failing fingers, stiff and sluggish under someone else's control, just barely form letters.

"Rei hit me," he finger-spells, and she appears in front of him, shrieking fit to… well, wake the dead. It doesn't break Shinsou's control, but she already slowed him down by pulling at him. Rei screams in his face, shoving at him to push him back toward the center of the ring. Black eyes flash up to his face, desperate and apologetic.

"Sorry," she signs to him, and her hand lashes out.

Rough claws rake his face, and his head snaps to one side with the force of the blow.

—blunt nails, fingers clutch at him in the dark, grasping for his throat. many hands, many voices, harsh breathing on his neck, eerie wails that scrape in his ears. they are angry. he cannot get out. he cannot get away—

He startles awake with a harsh gasp. The shadowy forms in his vision are gone. His feet are right at the edge of the ring, but still within it. Rei hugs his arm, and she still doesn't speak out loud but he hears the *sorrysorrysorry* in her quiet whimpering.

Has he stopped? Is he free?

Looks like it.

The boy has good friends.

Now try again, little one.

Izuku bites his lip. His face stings. He glances down at his best friend and smiles. Thank you, he mouths.

Rei smiles back, winks, and mimes zipping her mouth shut.

He takes a deep breath, then turns on his heel and runs back to win.

Chapter End Notes

> Congrats to everyone who foresaw Rei being the one to snap him out of the mind control.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

I have been waiting so long to do this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Pretty close one there, Midoriya,” Ojiro laughs.

Izuku winces as he takes a seat in the stands with Ojiro on one side, and Iida and Uraraka on the other. He’s fresh off of a conversation with All-Might with a few things to think about. But that’s okay, because he’s retrieved Mika for the time being, and Mika has this strange ability to make his thoughts less… loud. Now, she settles easily into his lap, purring when Iida reaches over to give her ears a scratch. “Sorry, Ojiro,” he says with a sheepish grin. “Even after all your help, I still almost blew it.”

“It’s cool—what matters is, you pulled through,” his classmate tells him.

“I have to admit, I didn’t catch what you did, Midoriya,” says Iida. “The angle was wrong, and I didn’t have a good view.”

“Yeah, you moved really fast,” Uraraka adds. “It looks like you scratched yourself pretty bad, though. Is your face okay?”

“Does it look bad?” Izuku rubs at his still-tender skin. It still stings a bit from Rei’s nails, but he’s not bleeding and it doesn’t appear to have broken skin, so there was no need for Recovery Girl’s help.

“It’s not too bad,” she assures him. “Mainly just looks like welts.”

“That was pretty cool, though, that you muscled out of that mind control.” Ojiro looks sheepish. “I don’t know if I could have pulled that off.”

“Well I have a pretty thick skull, apparently,” Izuku laughs nervously. The less he says about how he broke free, the better. Eager to change the subject, he turns back to the match about to take place before them. He leans forward eagerly, focusing on the two figures in the ring below. Sero stands on one side, Todoroki on the other.

It’s not that he disrespects Sero in any way. But if he were the betting

type, his money would be on Todoroki. Still, though, it's worth it to see how this match goes, either way. Whoever he ends up facing, he hopes at least that he can get some good data out of watching this match. It'd be nice to see if fighting Sero can expose any weaknesses in Todoroki, or vice ver—

CRACK.

…Or it'll end in three seconds and wow, Izuku *really* needs to pee all of a sudden.

There is a glacier jutting out over the top of the stadium, jagged spikes stretching toward the sky. It creaks and groans under its own weight, but aside from that, for a few glorious seconds, the stands are dead quiet.

At the base of the glacier, Sero is almost entirely encased in ice. His voice sails out through the air, shaking with cold.

"That was a little much, doncha think?"

There's a space of about six feet between the spot where Todoroki's standing, and the very edge of where the glacier begins. The gap between Todoroki and Sero himself is even wider. Izuku's close enough to see Todoroki shake as he closes that distance.

He sees Todoroki say something, but the distance coupled with the calls of encouragement from the crowd—all aimed at Sero—make it impossible to hear. Sero responds, and Todoroki starts melting the ice that he just created.

His shoulders slump, and there's something in his posture, some angle of his spine, that betrays a sense of misery. There's no triumph here. Not even relief over a quick victory.

He just seems… alone.

Out of the corner of his eye, he's vaguely aware of Uraraka reaching over Iida to give him a comforting four-fingered pat on the shoulder. "Nice knowing you, Deku," she says.

Izuku can't tear his eyes away, for all that there's nothing helpful that he can glean from this. What can he possibly learn? That his next opponent can one-shot someone from six to nine feet away?

Six to nine feet

Rei's cold hands clutch at his sleeve, and Mika rolls over in his lap to do paw-presses against his stomach.

Six to nine feet

That is *so much room—*

Izuku shifts forward in his seat so abruptly that he nearly dislodges his cat. He stares, eyes wide, mouth half-open, first at Todoroki, then at the gradually melting glacier, and then down at his own two hands.

"Midoriya?" Iida nudges him gently. "Are you quite all right?"

"Something wrong with your hands?" Ojiro asks.

"Not yet," he says.

"Not… yet?" Ojiro echoes.

"I'm trying to decide," Izuku explains, still considering his hands. "Which finger I can fight without." He pauses, mind racing, and frowns down at the ring and the ice and his next opponent. "Thumbs are right out. I'm gonna need my thumbs."

"Ooookay," Ojiro mutters.

"Deku, what's up?" Uraraka asks. "You look kind of funny right now."

"I think I know what to do," he says. He feels a tug at the corners of his mouth. "It's not foolproof, but." Piece by piece, some semblance of a plan takes form in his head. He turns to Uraraka, and the tugging is too much to resist, so he smiles until his lips part and he's half-sure they can see his gums. "I have an idea."

Iida looks worried. Uraraka looks excited. In his lap, Mika shifts to a more comfortable position and purrs.

The first round of matches goes by. Part of Izuku wants to go out and talk to ghosts again, but mostly he can't stand the thought of missing any of his classmates' matches. Rei wanders off to amuse herself, and Izuku settles in to watch his friends and acquaintances face off against each other. He sees Kaminari face off with Ibara from Class B, and then the somewhat baffling match between Iida and Hatsume, and that's when Uraraka excuses herself to go to a waiting room. Her match is coming up—she's fighting Bakugou first.

Izuku really, really hopes she can beat him.

Not long after Uraraka leaves, Izuku gathers up his cat and makes his way out of the stands to join his friends. The ghosts are quiet and calm. The poltergeist is nowhere to be found.

Uraraka loses.

It's hard to watch. Not because Bakugou crushes her—far from it. It hurts because she gets so far, and she gets so *close*. Her strategy is reckless, desperate, and absolutely ingenious. Izuku would like to think he could have come up with something like that in her place, but he isn't sure. She gives it her all, and Izuku can't help but wonder what it would have been like to face her himself.

For now, he's not going to find out. Because no matter how hard she fights and how smart she fights, her best just isn't enough against Bakugou.

Izuku's best has been losing to Bakugou since before Bakugou even had a quirk. He *knows* it has to hurt. He's memorized that sting so well that he can feel it himself as Uraraka's carried out of the stadium on a stretcher.

(Bakugou doesn't gloat, later. He doesn't complain about how close she came to winning. Maybe he sees how good she is, too.)

Rei helps him track her down later, after Recovery Girl has released her. On the way, Izuku fumbles with words in his mind, struggling to untangle them and string them together into something that might make things better. He's shocked when he walks into the room and she greets him with a bright smile that stretches her mouth to its limits. She looks tired but mostly unhurt. Izuku has been bracing himself for crushing disappointment, and is wholly unprepared for her bashful optimism.

"Darn it," she says. "I guess I lost after all, haha!"

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"I'm so *bummed*." She laughs, shaking her fist in an exaggerated way. "I'll get him next time, though." She smiles at him, her face pink with embarrassment. She won't meet his eyes. "Sorry, Deku. I really wanted to be able to face you today."

"Yeah, me too." He pauses, arms full of cat. "Are you sure you're okay?"

“Of course!” She fist-pumps again. “I just jumped the gun and he got the drop on me, that’s all. I’m really bummed out about it, and I just—gotta work on that, y’know?”

Rei is right next to him, but Izuku doesn’t need to look at her to know Uraraka’s lying. “Yeah—” Present Mic’s commentating reaches his ears. From the sound of it, Kirishima and Tetsutetsu’s match is nearly done. Round two is up, and that means…

“It’s almost time for you to go up again, huh,” Uraraka says. “You’d better hurry. I’ll be out in a minute—” She smiles so hard that her eyes nearly squinch shut. “I wouldn’t miss your match.”

“Sure,” he says.

He’s only a few steps away from the door when he hears her sobbing over the phone.

It’s a good thing he’s that far away. He’s always been far too emotional for his own good. If he were in there with her, he’d probably break down crying, too. As it is, it’s all he can do to stand in the hallway and hug his cat to his chest to ward off the tears.

One deep breath later, then two, then three, and he looks down at Mika. He looks back at the waiting room he’s only just left. Uraraka’s voice is soft, her sobs muffled.

It’s a quick decision, and an easy one. Two birds, one stone.

“Uraraka?” He calls her name a few seconds before he gets back to the doorway, to give her time to wipe her eyes and compose herself. (She’s quieted, but it never hurts to be safe.) It’s easy to pretend he’s distracted; with his next match so near, the nervousness is starting to set in. He walks in quickly, already babbling a stream before she can get a word in.

“I really hate to ask this and it’s pretty short notice but I only have maybe two minutes and I don’t know if I have time to find All-Might and I definitely don’t have time to find Aizawa-sensei so could you watch my cat?” He doesn’t wait for an answer before plopping Mika into Uraraka’s lap.

“Um,” she says, bewildered.

He shoots her a quick smile. “Thanks, Uraraka, you’re the best!” And with that, he doesn’t exactly bolt out of the room, but he does power-

walk.

Ochako stares at the empty doorway long after Deku is already gone. Bemusement has stalled her tears for now, and all she can do is blink speechlessly after Deku before looking at the faintly bewildered cat occupying her lap.

“Ochako?” Dad’s voice brings the phone back to her ear. “Ochako, what was that? Did something happen?”

“Y-yeah,” she answers, and squeaks a little when Deku’s cat stands up in her lap, circles a little, and settles down again. “Sorry, Dad, just…” She lowers her free hand to the soft fur, and the low rumble of Mika’s purring is almost immediate.

She can’t help it. Maybe it’s because she’s still sort of crying, maybe her emotions are still all over the map, but Ochako sits in the empty waiting room with a purring cat cuddling up to her, and giggles.

“It was one of my friends,” she says at last. “I think, um… I think he was trying to cheer me up.”

“Well, did it work?” Dad asks.

Mika pushes her head into Ochako’s hand, demanding more petting. Ochako’s eyes still sting, and her face feels stiff with dried tears, but it still makes her smile. “Little bit,” she answers.

“Good. I’m glad you have friends like that, Ochako. I’m proud of you, you hear?”

“Loud and clear, Dad.”

She learns an important lesson that day: that crying your eyes out with your best friend’s cat purring like a plane engine in your lap is a whole lot better than crying your eyes out all alone.

My little brother’s feelings hum like he’s full of bees, that’s how nervous he is. Nervous for the fight, and nervous for what he’s just done, leaving Mika in his friend’s lap. The questions buzz in his head, and I can’t hear those but I can guess what they are—did I do that okay? Did I make it better instead of worse? Was that right?

(He doesn’t need to worry. We’re not so far away from her that I can’t feel it. It was right. He made it better.)

I would tell him that, but there are more important things to tell him. Like how the angry ghost from before is close, and getting closer. And how the reason why he's close is because—

I tug on my little brother's arm. I point to the nearest corner, where another hallway meets the one we're in. He pauses, and his nervousness spikes when the man walks around the corner wreathed in flames.

That's him. That's Endeavor. *The angry ghost is with him, quiet for now but still in a temper. There's a second one along with them, and his smile is not a very nice smile, and his laugh is not a very nice laugh.*

Oh hey, you're that kid Suzuki was talking about, *he says when he sees my little brother. He nods at Endeavor, smiling his mean smile.* Watch out for this asshole, he's in a mood. He bought a thing of water, and I knocked it into his lap. He chewed out the guy next to him. Funniest fuckin' thing I've seen all day.

The angry one doesn't say much. But Endeavor does, and I don't have to dig deep to feel what's inside of him. He wears his anger like armor and his pride like a second skin. Everything is on the outside, and even if I try to dig deep, it goes on and on and on. He's mad and mean and he thinks he's better.

I don't like him.

If he comes too close to my little brother then I'll make him a f r a i d.

Clever of you, *he says to my little brother.* Winning without even using your quirk. I hope you don't think that will carry you the rest of the way. Especially if you hope to last against my son.

he's a bully he's a bully he's a bully ***he's a big, stinking bully***

But I've heard rumors about you, *he says, as my little brother's fear stirs and twists inside of him.* About how your quirk is powerful enough to rival All Might's.

His anger peaks, and my little brother makes it look like he isn't strangled by his fear.

"Come away," I tell him with my hands. I don't need to urge him. He's walking faster now. He wants to get away. My little brother doesn't like bullies.

My Shouto has a duty to surpass All-Might, *Endeavor says, before we*

can escape. His match against you will be an excellent first test.

(You are nothing, is what he really says. You are not a challenge. You are something to be stepped over.

He should hope that he doesn't die too soon. If he does, then Mr. Okumura will have to wait his turn.

No one talks to my little brother that way.)

So you'd do well to at least try to give him a proper challenge, *Endeavor says.* I don't want to see a disgraceful match.

(My little brother's anger spikes, so strong and white-hot that I mistake it for my own. The fear has to move out of the way because now the anger fills him from his heart to his throat.

He would make a frightening ghost.)

He smiles.

Well now I'm torn, *he says.*

Endeavor asks him why.

I was going to do that anyway, *says my little brother.* But now I kind of don't want to.

What—

I'm bad at doing what I'm told, *my little brother goes on.* Ask anyone.

Endeavor bristles, anger sharp like thorns. You—

Don't worry, *my little brother says, and keeps walking.* I'm not gonna lose out of spite. That'd be stupid.

Endeavor seethes on the inside, but inside or outside doesn't matter to me. Clearly your quirk isn't the only thing similar to All-Might, *he says.*

I am not All-Might, *my little brother says, and his anger burns hot but his voice is cold, cold, cold.*

That's obvious, *says Endeavor, and he reeks with contempt.*

Good, *says my little brother.* And Todoroki isn't you. That's pretty obvious, too.

Endeavor has nothing to say to that, because now it's his turn to choke on his own anger. I laugh and laugh and laugh.

Better hurry, *my little brother says as he walks away.* I bet if you're fast, you can get a new drink before the match starts.

It's too bad he's walking away, because he misses the look on Endeavor's face. Hino laughs with me, and my brother's anger makes him smile with all his teeth.

Rei stays on the sidelines as Izuku walks into the ring. The walk from the hallways out into the stadium has calmed his anger and at least some of his nerves. It's hard to quiet all of them with Todoroki watching him intently as they wait for the signal from Midnight.

When it comes, Izuku barely hears Todoroki's voice over the roaring in his own ears.

"Nothing personal," Todoroki says, and Izuku is already off and running.

This first part may be the most important. If he messes this up, then it's all over before it even begins. He's afraid to blink; he's afraid that if he shuts his eyes even for a split second, he'll miss something, or he'll trip, or he'll get the timing wrong. And for this, timing is absolutely everything.

He's maybe nine feet away, and his eyes are on Todoroki's hands. The sweeping motion of Todoroki's arm is familiar; Izuku recognizes it from just a split second before Sero lost.

At that moment, his eyes move from Todoroki to the ground between them, and he sees the ice rapidly spreading—not just spreading, but growing. By the time it reaches him it'll be high enough to encase him and end the match.

Time slows as Izuku steels himself and leaps as high as he can without his quirk. He points his left arm straight down, holding his wrist in his right hand to brace it.

Now or never

He pours One For All into his left pinky and flicks. Adrenaline keeps the burst of pain to a manageable level, and he muffles his cry of pain. The ice below, previously rising up to trap him, explodes beneath a

shockwave of air, springboarding him higher into the air. The impact sends ice shards and mist flying, and he lands in the thick of it.

The landing jars his ankles but doesn't injure him, and he's already moving again the moment his feet touch the ground. The mist is disorienting but far from blinding, and he can see Todoroki just a few feet away, blinking in surprise.

Izuku comes at him from the left side, arm cocked back, and punches Todoroki straight in the eye.

He's rewarded by Todoroki's grunt of pain, and it takes every ounce of self control not to make one of his own. In his mind he can already hear the lecture he's probably going to get from Ms. Shimura.

If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times, short stack, your finger bones are delicate flowers. Skulls have one job, and that job is to keep your squishy little brain from getting splattered. If you introduce one to the other, you won't need One For All to crunch your hand.

He's pretty sure his fingers aren't broken, but if they are then it's nowhere near what his quirk normally does. So he doesn't let up. He can't afford to let up. Todoroki staggers under that first punch, and Izuku aims another toward his ribs before he can recover.

On the left side. Always on the left side.

It doesn't take long for Todoroki to catch up, but Izuku keeps at it, chasing that left side and aiming blow after blow. If he goes for Todoroki's right then he might get frozen, but if he goes for the left then he has Todoroki's own words confirming that there's a pretty low chance of him getting burned. Todoroki himself is starting to see this; Izuku keeps weaving, keeps going for that left side, so Todoroki throws punches and kicks of his own. They're mere seconds in, and it's devolved into a slugfest.

His right fist still aches from the first punch, and his left has one useless finger, but he still has legs and he still has elbows. He still has a perfectly good skull, if it comes to that.

The plan is almost disgustingly simple: aim for the one glaring weakness he knows Todoroki has. Hit hard enough to rattle him and destroy his concentration so he can't get his head together to use his quirk. And above all, don't let him get too far away.

He'd realized it when he saw the space between Todoroki and the

giant glacier that took out Sero: Todoroki's ice needs room to grow. It makes him good with long range, and not so good when his opponent's right up in his face. So Izuku breathes when he can, and stays in his opponent's face.

Besides that first blast, he hasn't even activated his quirk. And yet, from the looks of it, it's working.

He can still sense the gap between them. Todoroki is hard to read; there's no warning and no time to duck Todoroki's fist before it splits his lip. He goes in to retaliate and gets a palm to the nose for his trouble. Izuku licks his lip and tastes blood.

And yet…

Landing hits isn't as hard as it should be, considering that he's been training for weeks and Todoroki's been at this since his quirk first manifested. But in the back of Izuku's mind, what little of his brain isn't clouded with pain and adrenaline makes the connection. Todoroki focuses on his ice, and his ice works best at a distance. This means he might not have as much practice with close-range fighting, and half of his body is a glaring target that Izuku is taking advantage of for all he's worth.

If he keeps this up, if his stamina holds out and he doesn't make a stupid mistake, then…

Maybe he can win, like this.

Maybe he can win, just by aiming for the one place where Todoroki's weak.

The thought jars him, and Todoroki sees his hesitation and lashes out with his right hand. Izuku sees the ice crystals forming on his classmate's bare forearm, ducks, and lunges forward with a yell. He hits Todoroki's ribs with his elbow, as hard as he can. On the left side.

The blow forces a choked cry from Todoroki's mouth, and suddenly the bad taste in Izuku's mouth has nothing to do with the blood from his busted lip.

He tells himself that it's strategy. He reminds himself of what Ms. Shimura said about fighting smart. He reminds himself that Todoroki is the strongest person in class, and that he can't possibly win a fight against him without using every advantage he can scrape together.

But it doesn't stop it from feeling gross. It doesn't change the fact that he's latching on to his classmate's fears and insecurities—on something that's caused Todoroki so much pain—and digging his nails into it for the sake of winning.

It doesn't stop thoughts like *what if this is the only way he can be strong? By taking advantage of other people's pain?*

He doesn't feel like someone who's holding his own in a fight.

He feels an awful lot like Bakugou, actually.

The thought doesn't make him falter. It has the opposite effect—his frustration wells up until it's indistinguishable from rage, and he slams into Todoroki's ribs with his elbow again. This time when Todoroki gets knocked back, he falls to one knee.

"Are you *kidding* me right now?!" Izuku's voice cracks on the way out. He wonders what he must look like, yelling his head off with blood running from his nose and mouth.

Todoroki blinks up at him, shock registering in his eyes.

"You're supposed to be the strongest, aren't you?" Izuku's voice is ragged as he fights for breath. "After *everything* I had to go through just to get into this stupid school, I can take the strongest kid in my class *without even using my damn quirk?*"

He feels a breath of cold before he sees ice form, and he lunges again and closes the distance, right before slamming his foot into Todoroki's face. At the last moment he tries to soften it—and maybe that was stupid, maybe he could have won the fight by knocking him out and dragging him out of bounds by the collar, but he's too upset to care. It still connects, and the blast of ice goes wide. Some of it crystallizes on Izuku's left shoulder, but it's barely a glancing hit, and Izuku breaks it off by slamming his shoulder into his Todoroki's chest anyway.

"You can use your whole quirk!" Izuku yells. "You could've taken me down in seconds if you just used your whole—"

Todoroki's eyes flash. "I will *not*—" he snarls, and Izuku retches when Todoroki's knee crashes into his stomach. "You heard me, Midoriya!" Izuku's ears ring as he tries not to bring up what little there is in his stomach. "I told you—I'm going to climb over you with my right side only."

“Great job so far,” Izuku chokes out.

“I don’t *need*—” Another blow to the ribs. “—that bastard’s power!” Izuku ducks a right hook and aims a punch at Todoroki’s stomach, but his classmate braces himself for it. “I’m going to climb to the top without it!”

Izuku’s crouched low at this point, and when he thrusts himself upward, his forehead meets Todoroki’s chin. It hurts, but judging by the choking sound Todoroki’s making, he made his classmate bite his tongue. “Without his power?” he snaps. His temper makes him stupid. It makes him cruel. “You’re kidding me, right? It’s a little late to be saying that, don’t you think?”

Todoroki’s bared teeth look bloody. “I *will not*—”

“Oh, I’m sorry!” Izuku yells, as Todoroki turns to head to spit out bloody saliva. “Remind me—which one of us got in on *whose* recommendation again?”

It’s cruel. The words taste filthy as he says them, but he spits them out anyway, and retribution is immediate.

He takes the punch to his left eye, but it’s different this time. It doesn’t just hurt; it stings and burns, and he staggers back with a cry of pain. His neck hurts from the whiplash, but that’s not the most pressing issue. The most pressing issue is that his hand is coming away stained with red. He opens his eye, and blood stings when it runs in. He closes it. He’ll have to make do without depth perception.

His vision is narrow when he looks at Todoroki and finds his classmate staring at him, wide eyed, with his right fist encased in blood-smeared ice. They recover at the same time, and Izuku notices in the back of his mind that there’s an awful lot of space between them.

There’s no time for plans as the wave of ice comes at him, so Izuku doesn’t think. He just moves, and his right arm shatters when he calls on One For All to block.

The ice explodes with a thunderous crack, and it’s just about loud enough to drown out Izuku’s yell of pain. It’s not just the impact that hurts; there’s kickback from the punch, and when all is said and done, his arm hangs limp and useless at his side.

Dimly, he hears Present Mic and Aizawa’s voices through the speakers,

but he's past paying attention and he is not finished.

"Can you understand why that pisses me off so much?" His voice cracks as he gets in Todoroki's face again. It's hard to deal damage when he only has one working arm, and that one arm has a broken finger. But this can't end now. He's come too far.

He wants to win. But even if he doesn't, he'd like to feel like he did something.

"It took *everything* I had!" Todoroki flinches away from a punch, and he uses the distraction to kick out at his leading foot. "Everything! Just to get into this school!" He sucks in a breath. "Do you have any idea how annoying it is to see you *literally* half-assing it?!" Blood from his nose and lip runs into his mouth again, and he spits it out to the side. "What, do you think we're all so weak that you can come out on top without giving it your all?!"

"Well I *am* beating you," Todoroki says through clenched teeth. "Do you really think you can win with that arm?"

"Yeah, congratulations." Izuku's voice drips with sarcasm. "Sure, you can beat me, when I have one working arm and one working eye. Good for you, Todoroki! If you use half your power, you can beat half a person!" He thinks of Uraraka, whose best still lost against Bakugou, and Ojiro who bowed out because he hadn't been given the chance to try for his own victory. "God, you're so annoying! Everyone here is giving their all!" He thinks of Shinsou, whose quirk is perfect for taking out villains but missed his chance because it's useless for taking out training robots. "Kids who aren't even in Heroics are giving it their all!"

"I can't—"

"Quit playing around!" Izuku yells. "Do you really think you can beat B-*Bakugou* like this? Do you really think you can half-ass being a hero? Saving actual people?"

Todoroki kicks him back, until he has just barely enough room to throw more ice. "I *can't!*" Even when Izuku sacrifices another finger on his left hand to take out the frozen wave, Todoroki's voice still pitches above the blast.

"What do you mean you can't—"

"Do you even *know* what it's like?!" Todoroki cuts him off. Another

wave of ice, and Izuku repeats the maneuver he'd pulled at the start of the match. The only fingers he has left are his thumb and index finger, but it takes him in close again. He catches himself with his back to Todoroki, and he feels the cold reaching for him. On pure instinct, his elbow snaps back. He whips around at the waist, putting the full force of his body behind the blow, and he's rewarded when it makes contact, and he feels something give beneath it. Spinning around the rest of the way, he's met with the sight of Todoroki with blood fountaining from his newly broken nose. Tears glisten in his classmate's eyes, and he's not sure if they're a pain reflex from getting hit in the face, or his classmate is just that upset.

"What *what's* like?"

"Did you see me, when you first looked at me?" Todoroki hisses, as blood runs freely from his nose. "Or did you just see Endeavor's son?"

Izuku stares at him, still half blind. "W-what?"

"It doesn't matter what I do," Todoroki grits out. "That's all they ever see. If I use my fire, that's all *anyone* will see! They won't see me—they'll just see the man who made my mom suffer, and threw her away when she broke." His breath hisses through his teeth. "I'm not going to give them any reason to see that bastard in me."

And for a split second, Izuku gapes at him through one open eye.

Oh.

And the answer is—yes. Yes, he does know what that's like. How many hours has he spent suffering over stupid fraud psychics?

How much time has he spent agonizing over the knowledge that a fraud psychic is all anyone will see if he ever reveals his original quirk?

Oh.

He sees ice forming at Todoroki's right arm when he says, "Bullshit."

It's a miracle that Todoroki hears him. "What."

"I said that's bullshit and you know it." His teeth clench. His voice shakes. "You're crippling yourself for spite and it's stupid and insulting. All you're doing is wasting something that—that some people would give *anything* to have."

“Didn’t you hear me?” Todoroki sways on his feet. He looks almost as exhausted as Izuku feels. “All they’ll see is—”

“Then show them they’re wrong!” Izuku yells. “At least you *can*. If they don’t see you then *make them see you!*”

“But—”

What was it that Mom had said, about his quirk? “But nothing,” Izuku grits out. “Now stop *messing with me* already so we can finish this!”

“My father—”

“*I’m not fighting your fucking father right now!*”

His voice cracks and scrapes raw in his throat, and for a moment Todoroki stares at him. He would be wide-eyed if one of them weren’t swelling shut.

Izuku’s temper is frayed thin. " And neither are you! He's not standing in this ring right now, *we* are!” Now both eyes sting, not with blood but tears, and his mother’s words finally come to him. “Your quirk is your own, and no one else’s. So hurry up and *use it already.*”

He catches sight of Todoroki’s wide eyes one last time, before his classmate bursts into flame.

Well, he thinks, as the blast kicks up a wind that blows his hair back. *The match was fun while it lasted.*

“You’re damn crazy, you know that?” comes Todoroki’s voice out of the mess of power before him—fire on one side, ice on the other. “You might’ve won that. But no, you just had to run your mouth. And go out of your way to—” He sees his classmate at the heart of the storm, staring at him with eyes blazing. “Why?”

Izuku can’t tell if Todoroki can even hear him. “You looked like you needed help.”

“You can’t win this,” Todoroki tells him.

“Probably not,” Izuku says, shrugging his one good shoulder. “But we can at least make it look cool, right?”

This time, when he bares his teeth in a grin, Todoroki smiles back.

The world goes white for a while.

When it comes back, Izuku is flat on his back, outside of the ring, with Rei's hair tickling his nose as she leans over his face. Everything hurts, and defeat has never tasted so much like victory.

Chapter End Notes

CW: Implied/referenced child abuse, serious injury, narrowly-avoided eye injury.

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Midoriya Izuku has to be carried off the field. Shouto doesn't, but it's only by that much.

He vaguely recalls Midoriya kicking him in the face at some point. It must have happened, because why else would his left eye be swollen shut? He might have blamed the elbow, but no, the elbow was what smashed his nose. That's fun—the slightest gust of wind sends pain shooting through his entire face.

To say nothing of the fact that he feels incredibly lopsided at the moment. He's fine on the right, but the left side of his body is spotty with aches and pains. His left foot feels sprained, and he has to favor it to keep from falling over. He's at least eighty-percent sure his wrist is broken. The main reason he's still upright is that he's already icing his ribs on the left side.

This has been… something of a learning experience.

He's only recently started paying much attention to Midoriya, and his general impression of his classmate has thus far consisted of a short list of adjectives including but not limited to "excessively chatty," "way too cheerful," and "creepy beyond all reason."

Now, he can add "pretty goddamn vicious".

Oh, and his tongue is still bleeding. That's uncomfortable.

Shouto shoots another quick glance at Midoriya, and grinds his teeth against the lurching feeling in his stomach. As terrible as he feels, Midoriya looks worse. His classmate's left eye is still shut, crusted over with blood.

Midoriya catches him looking, and shows his teeth in another smile that would already be unsettling without the eye injury and streaks of dried blood. "Hey, Todoroki," he says, before he's carried off out of Shouto's hearing range. "Tell your dad I said—how's that for a disgraceful match?"

…He's still creepy.

Needless to say, Recovery Girl is fit to be tied.

“I have had it up to *here* with you!” The school’s formidable nurse has worked herself into a tirade, and Izuku doesn’t blame her. He’s starting to lose count of how many broken bones she’s had to fix on him. “Of all the reckless, empty-headed, foolish, careless stunts—”

“I’m not sorry,” Izuku says.

That does nothing to help Recovery Girl’s temper, and it’s not meant to. It’s the truth, and no amount of her scolding—whether it’s aimed at him, or at a meek-looking Todoroki carefully rinsing his mouth with warm salt water by the sink—is going to change that.

“I didn’t say I was happy about it,” he admits. There’s gauze plastered over his left eye and blood still congealing on much of his face. His hands are a mess, and his right arm is bleeding as well as broken. Izuku isn’t sure if the ice tore into it, or he hit hard enough to literally explode his arm. He’s trying not to think too hard about it. Recovery Girl’s doing more than enough fussing and tongue-lashing for all three of them. (He half-expects Rei to get snippy with her for yelling at him, but so far all she’s been doing is staring at the tiny old lady with wide eyes.) “But honestly I’d do it again. Except try harder, probably.”

Recovery Girl glares daggers at him, and then leaves his side to finish tending to Todoroki. She’s already fixed his eye—it’s no longer swollen shut, though it still looks a bit purple.

“I think I’m fine,” Todoroki says softly.

“Todoroki, I am *really* not in the mood.”

“No, I mean your quirk uses my stamina, right?” Todoroki says. “I still have to fight, so—”

“If you expect me to send you back out there with hairline fractures in your wrist and your ribcage, then you have another think coming, young man,” Recovery Girl snaps.

“Okay,” Todoroki concedes. “But I still need all the stamina I can keep.”

“Spare me from reckless boys who think I’m a miracle worker,” Recovery Girl mutters. “Fine, I’ll leave your nose alone, provided you at *least* let me splint it.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I’d like to give that Present Mic a piece of my mind,” Recovery Girl goes on as she carefully examines Todoroki’s nose. “Egging you children on, making more work for me… Hold still—can you breathe normally?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good. And as long as you aren’t fighting, you might as well put your quirk to good use and ice this while you can.” Todoroki winces as she fixes a small splint in place. “And speaking of your quirk—in the future, be more careful about how you use it on your classmates! A little harder, and you could have caused serious damage to Midoriya’s eye—and believe me, eyes are *tricky*, especially when he already has a shattered arm to worry about.”

Izuku sees Todoroki shrink in on himself, just a little, and speaks up. “It’s not his fault—”

“Oh, believe me, I’m not finished scolding you, either,” Recovery Girl grumbles. “There,” she says to Todoroki. “That will do for now.” She motions for him to leave. “Go on, now—I have at least thirty bones to rebuild in your classmate’s arm.”

Todoroki leaves without a word. On his way out he’s nearly trampled when Uraraka, Iida, Tsuyu, and Mineta come barging in, but he manages to slip past them and out of sight.

“Deku that was so intense, what the heck!” Uraraka’s voice pitches above the rest, though she’s hanging behind the other three. Mika’s wrapped in her arms, so she probably isn’t sure a cat is allowed in Recovery Girl’s medical ward.

“That was extremely reckless, Midoriya!” Iida adds. “What on earth were you thinking, continuing the fight in that condition?”

“Seriously,” says Tsuyu. “You two ripped up the arena so bad they’ve called a break to do repairs.”

“It was freaking scary!” Mineta pipes up.

But Recovery Girl is having none of it. “Out, all of you,” she says imperiously. “I’ll send him out when he’s fit to be walking around again, but until then, I need all of you out.”

His friends call out quick goodbyes before they're shooed from the room. The only one of his friends who's still with him is Rei, though she's keeping well away from any medical equipment. All-Might isn't here, though considering that both he and Todoroki got dragged in, that makes sense.

True to her word, she has to put him under while she fixes his arm. His dreams are unsettling and strange as always, and he wakes up groggy to find Rei in his face like a cat. Startled, he yelps, and feels Recovery Girl's hand on his shoulder.

"Don't move too much," she warns. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah," he says. "Weird dream." Blinking, he looks around and sees that the room is a touch more crowded than before. All-Might and Ms. Shimura came in at some point.

"That was… quite the show, my boy," All-Might sighs. He looks weary as he steps forward, giving Recovery Girl a generous berth. There's a browbeaten look on his face, and Izuku is abruptly aware of how he's probably spent the last few minutes.

"You missed it, shorty," Ms. Shimura says, confirming his guess. "She *really* chewed him out."

Izuku makes a noncommittal noise as he sits up and Recovery Girl helps him gingerly put on a shirt. He notes that his left eye is still bandaged.

"How do you feel, my boy?" All-Might asks him.

"Like I got hit by a train," Izuku answers. "But I derailed the first car in the process, so who's the real winner?" He winces as Recovery Girl fits a sling onto him. "I mean, it's the train, obviously, but at least there's a dent on the bumper. Is that the right word? Do trains have bumpers?"

"It's called the pilot," Ms. Shimura supplies helpfully. "Or the cowcatcher."

"Right, cowcatcher, that's it."

All-Might heaves a sigh. "I can't praise you for going so far, my boy," he says. "I don't want to see you destroying yourself anymore. Especially not in a mock fight."

With his good arm, he reaches up and gently touches the gauze on his face. “Didn’t feel very ‘mock’.”

Recovery Girl lightly swats his hand away. “Your eye is fine,” she assures him gruffly. “I didn’t use my quirk on it because considering the state of the rest of you, I had to prioritize. It’s going to scar, because that’s what happens when you heal the slow way—and that’s not the only thing.” She points to his injured arm, and he looks. For the first time, he notices the scarring on his arm and hand. His fingers look slightly crooked. “There’s only so much that my quirk can do. Your arm is still perfectly functional, but permanently warped.” She glares at him, holding his gaze so that he can’t look away. “Now you listen to me. I’m not going to be healing any more injuries like this, understand?” She glares at All-Might. “This isn’t working for him. You will find another way for him to learn how to use that quirk.”

All-Might nods.

Izuku is quiet as they leave. His arm still aches, and Rei is careful to avoid touching it.

“First part of the fight was pretty damn good, though,” Ms. Shimura tells him. “It was nice to see that the past couple of weeks’ training stuck.” She pats his good shoulder. “You did good up to the part where you exploded your own arm. Really waled on that kid.”

Izuku stops in the hallway. All-Might notices immediately and pauses with him.

“The fault is mine,” All-Might says, before Izuku has the chance to speak. “True, you went too far, but if I were a better teacher, I would probably have found a way—”

“It’s not just that,” Izuku interrupts. “It’s just…” His throat feels tight. Part of him wants to cry a little, but not so much that he’s actually going to. “I feel bad for thinking this, but I just—sometimes I just wish I had a useful quirk for fighting. I mean, without One For All. Because then I could actually hold my own without…” He shoots an apologetic look at Rei. She looks sad, so he reaches over surreptitiously and gives her hand a squeeze. These are stupid, useless thoughts that he can’t help having in his low moments, and truthfully he wouldn’t trade her friendship for anything. But *still*.

“That isn’t your fault.”

“I know,” Izuku says. “I know, and there’s nothing I can do about it, I

just…”

“Let me tell you something.” All-Might’s hand comes to rest on his shoulder. “Before I received One For All from my predecessor, I was also quirkless.”

He twitches at the ‘also’, and slowly raises his head to look at All-Might. “Really?”

“Yes.” All-Might smiles a little. “It wasn’t as rare as it is now, but it still wasn’t common.”

“You never said.” He’s not sure if he’s saying this to All-Might, or to Ms. Shimura. Did she even know? How long did she know All-Might before she died?

“You never asked.” All-Might presses his shoulder gently. “So I can understand your frustration, my boy. And, in spite of your difficulties, you have a good start. I saw you at the beginning of the match—with or without your quirk, you put up a good fight.”

Izuku grinds his teeth. “Yeah, but…”

“What’s wrong, my boy?”

“Is… is it stupid that…” He curls his left hand into a fist. “That I didn’t like how I was fighting?”

A pause. “How do you mean?”

“I mean, it felt—part of it felt good,” Izuku admits. “Because that’s the first time I’ve ever been in a straight fight where I felt like I was actually holding my own. But I had to get mean just to pull that off. I had to take advantage of things that I didn’t want to.” He points to his face. “That’s how this happened. I said something to him that was—really just cruel. I knew it was going to hurt him and I said it anyway, and that’s why he hit me like that. And that’s why I have that stupid wish sometimes, because maybe then I wouldn’t have to do stuff like that.” He shakes his head. “And it didn’t even work anyway. I wanted to win *so bad.* I wanted to beat him more than anything but I couldn’t just…”

“You knew something was wrong,” All-Might says. “And you couldn’t leave it be.”

“I can never leave it be,” Izuku says softly.

“I saw. Toward the end, your goal changed,” All-Might continues. “Didn’t it? You wanted to help him.”

“*Someone* had to.” Izuku’s voice comes out harsher than he intends. “Who else was gonna do it? *Bakugou*?” He grits his teeth until his head hurts. “And that’s why I can’t be sorry about how it turned out. Even if I wanted to win, even if you don’t approve, even if it was a stupid thing to do and none of his problems had anything to do with me. Because—if you know something’s wrong and you know you can do something about it, isn’t it your responsibility to help?”

All-Might is quiet for a moment. “You know,” he says at last. “I think you just summed up what it means to be a hero in one sentence.” Izuku looks up to find All-Might shaking his head with a smile. “Butting in to problems that have nothing to do with you is a cornerstone of heroics. So… while I can scold you for being reckless, and for hurting yourself so badly in the process, I can’t scold you for your reasons. I might have done the same in your place.”

“Hey, beansprout?” Ms. Shimura adds. “When he says ‘might have’, he means ‘definitely would have, in a heartbeat.’ Just thought you should know.”

Izuku smiles. His feelings on this whole mess are confusing and contradictory and hopelessly snarled, but at least he can smile when Ms. Shimura makes a joke.

They’re almost to the stadium again when he hears Rei’s warning hiss. He turns to find her stopped at the entrance to an adjoining hallway, glaring down it with her hair stirring as if in a breeze. White ghost light emanates from within her mouth.

He’s nearby, she signs, and a familiar rumbling voice drifts down the hall. There’s too much distance for Izuku to make out words, or feel the heavy pressure in his skull that he’d felt when that voice was shouting in his face. *The angry one’s yelling at him. He can’t hear, but it still hurts him.*

Movement flashes at one of the doorways in the connecting hall, and a familiar ghostly woman appears as if she’s been thrown out. Suzuki looks about as disheveled as an incorporeal spirit projection can look.

“Okumura, stop it!” she calls into the room. “He hasn’t done anything to you!”

“Midoriya?” All-Might’s voice draws his attention, and he realizes he’s

stopped in the middle of the hallway, too. “Are you—?”

“I’ll catch up,” Izuku says. “You go on ahead, I’ll be out in a bit. I just need to check something.”

“Are you sure you—?”

“Yup.” Izuku’s already walking into the hallway, signing to Rei as he goes. *Make sure he doesn’t follow me.*

He’s not, is her answer. *He’s walking away.*

“Kiddo, what do you think you’re doing?” All-Might isn’t following him, but Ms. Shimura is. “If this is about what I think this is about, keep in mind your arm’s useless and this guy wall-slammed you less than an hour ago.”

Rei snarls at this. Suzuki hears them coming and startles a little. Izuku doesn’t blame her; it’s hard not to startle when Rei’s in a temper.

“It’s—he’s just—” Suzuki catches sight of Izuku’s face, and her own face falls. “Oh.” She wrings her hands. “You—you know the poor boy didn’t mean it, don’t you? He just…”

Izuku touches the gauze on his face and shrugs.

He steps past her to the doorway, and immediately Okumura’s voice reverberates in his eardrums.

“**—and maybe this whole fucking family’s toxic. Your dad poisons everything he touches, doesn’t he?**”

Todoroki’s sitting in the waiting room, frowning listlessly at the wall. He doesn’t look up when Izuku stands in the doorway, and Izuku doubts his classmate has noticed him. His nose is splinted, his face blotched purple with bruises, and he’s staring off into the middle distance as a nightmare hovers over him and spits verbal poison at him.

“**Even for a snot-nosed kid, you’re pathetic,**” Okumura snarls. “**You, different from him? Don’t make me laugh. You run your mouth, and then ten minutes later you’re throwing your weight around just like him. Hey—did you *need* to take out that one kid with a fucking iceberg, or did you do it just to show everybody how big and tough you are?**” He leans in close, face twisting. “**And how about that kid you punched? Maybe you’ll leave him a**

pretty little scar just like yours."

The tickle of fear in Izuku's spine vanishes, consumed by white-hot anger.

Shouto's thoughts are dark.

It's unavoidable, sitting by himself in an empty room with no one to talk to, no distractions, nothing to drown out the chaos in his head. At this point he'd almost welcome another talk with his father. At least he knows to treat everything he hears from that bastard's mouth as trash. He can't do the same with the things that his own brain has to say about him.

He doesn't feel like he's in control anymore.

His mind ties itself in knots just trying to remember when he stopped feeling in control. His first thought is that it was right before he stopped thinking and nearly gouged out Midoriya's eye. Or was it before that, with the first punch Midoriya threw? Or maybe even earlier, when he lost control and hurled an iceberg at Sero.

Or maybe, he hasn't felt in control since… ever.

Maybe he's never been in control.

Maybe Endeavor poisons everything he touches, and Shouto's just been living with him long enough to absorb it.

He's pathetic. Different from his father? What a joke. After all his talk, after all his stupid vows and promises, he throws his weight around just like the old bastard. That fight with Sero—ha, "fight," that's a laugh. All he did was panic and lose his temper and take out his own frustration with his own problems out on someone who had nothing to do with them. How was that any different from what Endeavor was doing, dragging his family into his stupid rivalry?

And Midoriya.

He'd hit Midoriya, and that wasn't the issue; the issue was that he hadn't *meant* to. He hadn't planned on it. It'd just *happened*, his body just *moved*, because he was angry and terrified and Midoriya's words cut extra deep when he knew that he couldn't say his classmate was wrong.

Maybe he'll end up with a scar, just like me.

It's getting hard to breathe.

"*Stop it.*"

Shouto starts, leaving a patch of ice on the table beneath his right hand. He looks up, caught off guard, to find Midoriya Izuku staring in his direction with the ugliest look of fury Shouto's ever seen on him. And considering the range of expressions he saw over the course of their fight, that's saying something. His spine crawls, and he's caught between squirming uncomfortably in the face of that piercing glare, and being unable to look away.

Midoriya's left eye is bandaged. It's not quite to the same extent that Shouto's once was, years ago, but it's enough to be unsettlingly familiar.

It's enough for Shouto to understand why Midoriya would look at him like that.

The crawling on his back turns to chills so cold they almost burn. His head aches with building pressure as he fidgets in his seat and finally manages to tear his eyes away. His broken nose sends twinges of pain through his skull.

"Stop what," he says.

For a moment, Midoriya doesn't answer him. There's a tension in the air, thick as ice, and Shouto has to clench his fists and force himself not to fidget.

What is he supposed to say? *Sorry for almost gouging your eye out, I didn't like that you pointed out that my asshole father got me into this school and I was maybe making your hard work look pointless, my bad.*

"You're moping," Midoriya says at last. "Which is fine. Nothing wrong with that." He pauses. "Unless it's about me. Is it?"

Shouto doesn't answer. He hopes that's enough of an answer by itself.

Another stretch of silence passes between them. Shouto keeps his eyes fixed on the table top, and doesn't look at Midoriya's face again.

"What do you want, Midoriya."

He doesn't even need to look at Midoriya's face; he can feel his

classmate's eyes (or just one eye, now) burning a hole in the back of his head. "Just looking for my cat," he answers, after far too long a pause.

"Oh," Shouto says. "Well. It's not in here."

Midoriya lingers at the doorway a moment longer before answering. "I'll leave you alone," he says stiffly, and Shouto doesn't move again until Midoriya's footsteps are already fading away.

Okumura was angry enough that it made him strong. Izuku could tell, because it had taken both Rei and Ms. Shimura working together to drag him away from Todoroki. He could tell, because when they did, and when Okumura had lashed out at them and at Todoroki and anything that moved within his reach, Todoroki had felt it. He'd felt *something*, at least, and it looked like it had hurt.

It's a miracle that Izuku kept his temper as well as he did.

Izuku hadn't watched Rei haul Okumura out of the room with Ms. Shimura's help, but he wouldn't have needed to. Okumura is making enough of a racket to lead him right to them. All he has to do is follow the screams of rage and the trail of blinking lights.

The hallway is empty of life when he catches up to them. Rei's gone all eldritch-horror again, writhing with darkness and terror and ghost lights and twisting tendrils of black hair. The fluorescent panels nearest to them are more like strobe lights as they face off. Ms. Shimura keeps well back, with Suzuki hiding behind her.

If Okumura was in a mood before, then he's boiling mad now. Tangling with Rei slows him down, but he still throws himself toward Izuku, trying to claw at him while Rei bites at his heels. "**How *dare* you.**" Izuku keeps walking forward.

"Midoriya," Ms. Shimura mutters, but Izuku doesn't stop until he's almost nose to nose with Okumura and hissing his own venom in the poltergeist's distorted face.

"How dare *you*."

Izuku can get mad, too. He can get so mad that his eyes get hot and his heart goes stony and his voice gets cold, colder, and even colder.

"I don't care what you have against Endeavor," he says, and his voice

doesn't shake. He's too angry to be anything but dead-still and calm. "I don't care what he did to you, or how he hurt you." His voice lowers, harsh and quiet but as steady as a headman's axe. "I don't care if he spat in your face in murdered you in cold blood. Don't you *ever* use me as an excuse to hurt one of my classmates."

"**You'd side with that bastard's brat?**" Okumura snarls. The fear does its best to creep up Izuku's back, but his anger turns his insides to ice, and the cold makes him numb.

"He has nothing to do with your grudge," Izuku spits back. "*Our match* had nothing to do with your grudge. So don't you *dare* use it to bully him."

Okumura gives a wordless growl.

"Why do you hate him so much?" Izuku demands. "Endeavor. What did he do? How did he cause your death?"

At first, the furious ghost doesn't answer beyond more twisted screaming. Izuku waits until he gets some of that rage out of his system. He's a patient person, and after a minute or so, it pays off.

"**They had us cornered,**" Okumura replies, his voice choked and raspy. "**The police had us cornered. What we did was stupid, and we knew it. We** knew it." His voice changes. The shadows settle. His face settles. For a moment, Izuku sees a man—he's young, even younger than Aizawa-sensei. He looks less angry than frustrated. Sad. "We were desperate. We were tired. We were…" He stiffens and twists, as if the memory causes him physical pain. Maybe it does. "We were *scared*. We wanted to stop. We were ready to stop. We were ready to give up, turn ourselves in." His voice catches, and he steels himself again. The shadows gather around him once more, and his face flickers and melts back into a nightmare. "**And then *he* showed up.**"

"Endeavor," Izuku says softly.

"**It took too long for him. He got impatient. He broke the standoff, and everyone spooked. He turned it into a shootout. I ran away, and someone shot me in the back.**" His form flickers, and for an instant Izuku can see the hole in his chest where the bullet punched right through. "**I don't know who shot me. Maybe it was some cop. Maybe it was one of my buddies. But I don't care. I'm dead because of *him*.**"

“But not because of Todoroki,” Izuku says flatly. “I’m sorry. That wasn’t fair to you. You should’ve had the chance to surrender, and he was wrong to take that away from you. But Todoroki had nothing to do with what happened to you.”

“**Like father, like son. It’ll happen again. The bastard raised his brat to hurt people.**”

“I don’t believe that,” Izuku retorts. “And even if that was true, it’s none of your business what he does. It has nothing to do with you, and you have no right to talk about him like that when you’re mad at Endeavor for taking away your second chance.” He is angry still, and he lets it burn in his eyes while his mouth stretches into a smile that shows all his teeth. “Leave him alone, or I’ll make you sorry you didn’t move on the second you died.”

A growl rumbles deep within the poltergeist, and he vanishes the moment Izuku blinks.

On instinct, he checks his surroundings. His classmates thus far have been more tolerant than the ones in his previous schools, but the last thing he wants is for someone to walk in on him spitting threats into empty air.

The hallway around him is devoid of life.

Izuku takes a deep breath, and lets it out again.

“Holy shit, kid,” Ms. Shimura whispers.

“That was…” Suzuki’s voice trails off.

“Ballsy,” Ms. Shimura finishes for her.

Izuku rubs his face with his good hand, careful not to disturb the bandaging over his eye. He feels tired. “I’m going out to the bleachers,” he says. Maybe Uraraka or Iida won’t mind if he dozes off on one of their shoulders.

Or maybe the excitement of the matches will wake him back up, or at least distract him from everything and let him forget for a while how heavy the dead can be.

Chapter End Notes

CW: injury, referenced child abuse, verbal abuse and victim

blaming of a child (Shouto) by an adult (OC).

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Check out this sweet fanart from the-creepy-unicorn on Tumblr!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He makes it just in time to see Iida face off against Todoroki. His classmates greet him. He's treated to jokes and gentle teasing, careful back-slaps that avoid his injuries. Mineta asks him loudly if Todoroki literally punched his eye out, until Tsuyu shoves him under his seat. If any of them notice how quiet he is, they don't say anything.

Uraraka sets Mika back in his lap. "Rotten luck," she says softly. Down below, the match is a quick one. Iida comes close to winning, but Todoroki freezes his engines and snatches the victory—without fire, Izuku can't help but notice.

He's only half listening. "Huh?"

"We could've lasted longer, you and me," she says. "But we got paired up with the two strongest right at the start."

"Guess so." Izuku pets Mika absentmindedly. "Not a good enough excuse, though. It's not like villains would throw the weak ones at us first just so we can level up."

Uraraka laughs. "That's a nerdy way of putting it. I like it." She's sitting on his uninjured side, and gently shoulder-checks him. "We'll just have to get stronger."

"Yup."

Iida rejoins them to a chorus of goodnatured congratulations. He's red-faced with embarrassment, but still smiles as he greets everyone. As far as Izuku can tell, he isn't near tears the way Uraraka was, but Izuku still lifts Mika carefully with one arm and offers her. Iida doesn't take her, but his grin widens as he gives her ears a scratch.

"I'm a bit sheepish," he admits. "I tried to learn from your match against him, but I guess it still wasn't enough. You probably got more out of his match with Sero than I got from his match with you."

"You sure look better than I do right now, though," Izuku answers.

“I suppose so—and *really*, Midoriya, you ought to have exercised more caution.” And now Izuku knows for sure that his friend is feeling all right, because nothing screams “high spirits” in Iida quite like an officious tirade about proper safety, complete with vigorous hand gestures. “You know, everyone saw that you gave your best and put up a good fight, and there would have been no shame—absolutely no shame—in forfeiting when you were no longer able to continue!”

Sitting back, Izuku grins and shakes his head. “You still got pretty close, Iida,” he says.

“I suppose so.” Iida’s smile turns sheepish again. “I wish my brother could have seen this, but he couldn’t make it.”

“That’s too bad.”

“Yes, unfortunately, he’s been busy with hero work lately.” Iida frowns. “There’s some villain on the loose, making trouble, and everyone’s on the alert.”

“I’ve heard,” Izuku says with a nod. “Somebody called Stain?” What a name, *Stain*. The reports that Izuku has seen make him sound pretty dangerous, though.

“Yeah, he’s come up on the news, hasn’t he?” Kirishima says. “Sounds like a real piece of work. Some people call him the Hero Killer.”

“He’ll be brought down soon enough,” Iida says with a shrug. “If nothing else, All-Might himself won’t allow him to continue much longer.”

The next match draws their attention once more. The Sports Festival is drawing closer to its end, and the contestants have dwindled down to three.

Izuku isn’t surprised when Bakugou beats Tokoyami. He’s kind of glad Tokoyami made it that far, though. He deserves it; he’s pretty much the only reason Izuku’s team pulled into the running at the end of the cavalry battle.

The final round is Bakugou against Todoroki. Izuku already knows who he’s rooting for.

Bakugou’s explosions make him jump nearly every time they detonate. His ears ring, his fingers are nearly numb from gripping his seat, and he’s clenching his teeth together so hard that his jaw aches. It’s a close

fight—closer than his match against Todoroki, as close as what the others are saying about Kirishima's fight against Tetsutetsu.

His vision is spotty from the bright flashing of Bakugou's explosions, but that's the only light he sees. Not a single spark of flame comes from Todoroki.

Izuku could hold his own against Todoroki without even using One For All. But Bakugou has a powerful quirk, and he's a strong and vicious fighter even without it. Ice alone isn't going to be enough, but Todoroki still doesn't bring forth his fire the way he did against Izuku.

"Do you think something's wrong with him?" He can barely hear Uraraka murmuring beside him; Bakugou's quirk nearly drowns her out entirely. "I bet he'd do better if he used his fire, don't you think?"

"He could still be injured," Tsuyu spoke up, pitching her voice above the din. "Pretty sure there's still a splint on his nose."

Kirishima nudges Izuku lightly from behind. "Yeah, you guys really messed up each other's faces. Your eye okay?"

"It's fine," Izuku replies. Down in the field, Todoroki takes a bad hit from Bakugou. It's a vicious punch to the gut, with an extra kick from the explosion detonating in Bakugou's palm, and it sends Todoroki flying back. When it makes contact, Izuku shuts his eyes and flinches. He's felt that one before. It's not fun.

Beside him, Rei growls softly.

"I think it might be over pretty soon," Uraraka says softly. "Todoroki's only on half power, and Bakugou…"

"Bakugou looks *pissed*," Kirishima says.

"He always looks pissed," Tsuyu points out.

"Yeah, but… I dunno, it seems different."

Izuku can see what Kirishima means, but he's trying not to think too hard about it. Bakugou's anger is not something he's eager to keep in mind. It's bad enough that he has to see it, and remember all the times that he's felt it before.

"He's hardly used his fire, though," Uraraka says. "Deku, you're the only one who saw it up close. Do you think something's the matter?"

The answer, of course, is no. He doesn't think, he *knows* that something's wrong. It would be harder to name something that's right.

It's depressingly simple, really. All this means is that it takes more than one conversation in the middle of a fistfight to fix what's broken.

Izuku's fingers tighten in Mika's warm, silky fur, and he watches through one stinging eye as Bakugou roars and blasts his way to victory. When Midnight calls the match, his resolve finally cracks. He can't watch any more. He can't watch the medal ceremony, either.

"Deku?" Uraraka says when he gets up from his seat. "What's the matter?"

He's already walking to the nearest exit from the stands.

He takes refuge in a waiting room, far enough away from the stadium that the cheers and noise from the spectators is a dull roar in the distance, muffled by a separation of thick steel walls. All he has for company are a cat, a ghost, and the occasional drifting spirit that pays him no mind, and that suits him just fine. Settling into a chair, he curls around his cat and breathes in and out and in and out until he stops feeling phantom gut-punches in his memory.

It's probably petty. It's probably a little pathetic. But he really, really didn't want Bakugou to win.

Of course, he'd started the whole Sports Festival with the burning desire to win. But in the (admittedly likely) event that he didn't, he'd known that at least there were several classes full of kids who weren't Bakugou and might win, and that would have been a consolation. But no. Bakugou wins, again. Like always. He won against Todoroki who was fighting with half his power, and Izuku could just barely keep up with Todoroki fighting with half his power.

He wonders, for a wild moment, if this is what Endeavor's felt like, staring at All-Might's back for years and years.

It can't be, though. Izuku isn't angry that he lost. He knows why he lost, and he knows he traded his chance to win for something just as worthwhile. This isn't about him winning or losing. This isn't just about Bakugou winning (again, again, over and over, might makes right, like winning erases all the things he's done). This is an old sting, a hopeless loop rinsing and repeating in which Bakugou wins and wins and wins and because he wins, he never thinks he's wrong. He never thinks that just because he wins, it doesn't make him a great

person or even a good one or even a decent one.

He just wins and wins, everyone sings his praises and turns a blind eye to his temper and his selfish mean streak, and Izuku is sick of watching it happen and sick of feeling like a petulant child for letting it hurt so much.

Izuku's eyes burn, but this time he holds back the tears. This isn't worth crying over. He'd feel that way even if he weren't sick and tired of letting Bakugou make him cry.

Mika purrs against his belly, and Rei's cold hug wraps around his uninjured arm. Izuku breathes in and out, slowly and steadily, until he feels better.

By the time he uncurls, ready to face the world again, it looks as if he's missed the medal ceremony. There are voices and footsteps in the halls. Not many—Izuku picked a waiting room that was out of the way of the main paths of foot traffic. Quietly he slips out into the hallway again. Maybe his friends will be wondering where he is.

"Um, excuse me? I hate to bother you again…"

Izuku looks up to see Suzuki standing not far off, twiddling her pale thumbs.

"It's just, I don't know who else to ask," she says. "I've never met anyone like you before."

"Is Okumura bothering him again?" Izuku asks.

"No, it's just…" Her voice trails off sheepishly. Her blank eyes implore him to understand.

And he does, a little.

"Where is he?" he asks.

She vanishes after giving him directions, and Izuku tucks his cat against his chest with one arm and strides off to see what he can do.

He finds Todoroki exactly where Suzuki said he would be. It's another waiting room well out of the way of the main hallways, quiet and empty aside from the odd spectator who took a wrong turn, or spirits passing through disinterestedly. Izuku pauses at the doorway and peeks in, not wanting to be noticed quite yet. Todoroki's in much the

same state as Izuku's been in for the past ten minutes. He's hunched, almost curled in on himself, fingers tangled in his hair. He's not too badly hurt, but he still looks wrecked.

The only difference between him and Izuku right now is that he doesn't have anyone offering him comfort.

For the moment, Izuku pulls away from the doorway. He feels like he's being pulled two ways. On the one hand, he wants to help. He's started down this road of helping Todoroki, and it would be stupid of him to leave it hanging now. But on the other, he's not sure if Todoroki would accept his help right now—or anyone's for that matter.

Well. Maybe anyone except…

Izuku takes a deep breath, backs further away from the waiting room, and hoists his cat up until they're almost eye to eye. It's hard to do with one arm, but he manages, and Mika's always been an agreeable cat.

"Alright, you," he whispers. "I've got another job for you. I need your A-game, got it?"

Mika presses her paw to his chin.

"I don't have any treats right now," he says. "Treats when you're done. Do your best, okay?" He plants a kiss between her ears. "Make me proud, Mika."

"Oh hey," he says as he steps back into the waiting room, as if he's completely surprised to find Todoroki sitting there. Todoroki straightens up as if someone's sent an electric shock up his spine, and Izuku pretends not to notice. "I hate to ask this but everybody's leaving so could you watch my cat real quick please because I have to go do—" He isn't really thinking about what he tells Todoroki he has to go do, and from the bewildered look on Todoroki's face he's probably not listening anyway, so he plops Mika into his classmate's lap and hurries out again with a "Thanks, I'll be right back."

A few minutes and he'll come back. Five minutes. Maybe ten.

He's not two steps from the doorway when he looks up and catches Aizawa-sensei's eye.

His homeroom teacher is in the hallway, out of sight from within the

waiting room but well within hearing range. Narita still flanks him, patiently waiting as always.

Even with the bandages on his face, Izuku can see when Aizawa's eyebrow rises gently.

He shrugs at his teacher and keeps walking. It's really not something he can explain away with words.

There is a cat in Shouto's lap and he's not entirely certain how he ended up in this situation.

He hasn't kept track of how long he's sat by himself in this room, dreading hearing his father's voice and feeling like the emotional equivalent of getting hit by a truck. He's been punched halfway across the stadium and back twice in one day and been shouted at by several different people, all for different reasons.

He wonders if anyone is really happy with the results of the festival. He knows he isn't. He's willing to bet his worthless father isn't. Aside from this sudden non sequitur outburst, Midoriya's been acting like someone kicked a puppy in front of him, so he knows he isn't.

Bakugou isn't happy with how it turned out, and he's the one who won.

And who's fault is that? Maybe if you'd just used fire instead of fighting like a coward, you could have given him a decent fight instead of half-assing it and leaving everyone dissatisfied —

The press of paws on his thigh startles him out of his train of thought. Shouto holds still as Midoriya's cat turns circles in his lap before shifting over and settling down.

On his left side.

Shouto isn't sure why he does it. He's cautious, not sure if Midoriya's cat is the scratching type, as he gently lifts the cat up and shifts it over so it's lying more evenly in his lap. Its head turns, and—oh, it's only got one eye. The left one is missing, the fur dinted with scars.

The cat lets out a soft, trilling meow, and shifts over again so it's curled up on his left thigh. He tries it again a couple more times, just to be sure, and each time, the cat moves back to its preferred spot. When he leaves it alone long enough, it shifts further so that it's

pressed up against his stomach.

Cats like warm things—the thought comes to him unbidden. That's why you always see pictures of them lying in sunlight, or on people's laptops. Of course it likes his left side better than his right.

He checks the tag on the cat's purple collar. It's a she, and her name is Mika. When he lowers his hand again to pet her, she responds with a bone-deep purr. Maybe he's imagining it, but it almost feels like the lingering aches in the spot where she's sitting are starting to fade.

"Hello," he says softly, as she pushes her head into his hand—the left one. She rolls over on her side and presses her paws to his stomach. "I'm wondering—what does he have to do that's so important that he'd give you to *me*? Do you know?"

The cat doesn't answer, of course, unless circling around so that she's leaning against his stomach again can be considered an answer.

Sadly, it isn't long before his father finds his hiding place. By the time he does, Shouto is dangling a shoelace for Mika to bat at. She isn't trying very hard, because she's more interested in draping herself bonelessly against his left side, but he dangles it low enough for her to catch between her paws.

"If you have time to be mucking around with stray cats, then you have time to come home and train," Endeavor snaps. "After today's showing, you clearly need it—especially if you're finally giving your rebellious little temper tantrum a rest."

"She isn't a stray," he says, ignoring the rest of what the old bastard tells him.

"What?"

"She's my classmate's cat," he says, without looking up. Mika pulls the end of the shoelace down and chews at the plastic casing until he tugs it out of her grip again. "They asked me to watch her for them. So obviously, I can't move from this spot."

From across the room, he feels his father's temper pulse.

"My hands are tied," he says flatly. "You might as well go home without me. I'll catch up."

His father's boots scrape on the floor as he steps closer. Startled, Mika

shifts so that her paws are beneath her again, and she's facing Endeavor. His father's voice is a growl, and Shouto focuses on the cat in his lap—as far as he's concerned, the most worthwhile thing in the room right now. "I have had *enough* of your petty, worthless little tantrums—" He reaches for the cat, and Shouto tenses to pull away.

Thorn-sharp claws dig through his pant leg and prick at his skin. The fur on Mika's back stands on end, and she lays back her ears and hisses loudly enough to make his father stop talking, which is frankly impressive. Her tail switches back and forth, and when Endeavor's hand comes too close, the hiss becomes a bubbling yowl as she lashes out at it.

Endeavor yanks his hand back, at the same time as Shouto scoots his chair further away. Mika, apparently unaware of how closely she's courting danger, keeps her ears flat against her head and spits. Her single eye is narrowed, and her mouth is open in what bears only a passing resemblance to a smile.

(He's reminded, just for a moment, of her owner.)

"I think," he says calmly, as he refrains from petting her again until her temper calms, "I should just. Wait for my classmate to get back."

He doesn't need to see his father's glare to feel the force of it. But glaring is all Endeavor does. Apparently he doesn't find the argument worth the trouble, or he's not interested in possibly losing a finger, because he storms out without another word. Mika settles down again, though it takes quite a bit of petting to get her purring again.

Not that Shouto's complaining.

Izuku does find a way to keep busy, while he gives his cat time to work her magic. He hates leaving things unfinished.

So, Rei helps him find Okumura again. Luckily, the poltergeist isn't hanging close to Endeavor at the moment. He probably figures that Endeavor's not likely to drop dead anytime soon here. So for now he's just drifting and sulking and making all the nearby ghosts skittish.

Okumura notices him right off, and his steps waver when the ghost drifts closer. This is his cross to bear, with an ability like this. At the very least, he's a novelty. At most, he's—for lack of a better term—a lifeline. And as far as he knows, he's the only one there is.

He doesn't speak at first—he just leads Okumura off, to somewhere they can talk in private without anyone with a pulse walking in and finding Izuku arguing with a wall.

Just to be safe, he puts his special little trick to good use. He takes out an old earpiece—one of those Bluetooth devices that have fallen out of style. It's old and useless and isn't connected to anything, but at the very least it'll make him look less strange if anyone finds him conversing with empty air.

"What do you want?" he asks, looking directly at the poltergeist's face. Okumura looks vaguely like the person he used to be, just… off. His death wound is gruesomely visible—not that Izuku isn't used to blood.

"**Stop getting in my way,**" Okumura snarls. Rei doesn't like his tone, and Okumura recoils when she growls right back.

"What do you want with Endeavor?" Izuku asks. "Why are you following him? What do you intend to do?"

"**I'm going to make him pay.**"

"How?" Izuku presses. "What do you actually mean to do?" He checks his surroundings again. "And bothering Todoroki? What's that supposed to accomplish?"

"**You know nothing,**" Okumura rumbles dangerously.

"You're right," Izuku tells him. "I don't understand what you're trying to do." His fists clench. "Do you think it will bring you back, if you tear his soul apart?"

"**Shut up.**"

"Do you think putting ugly thoughts in Todoroki's head will will get all the ugly thoughts out of yours?" he asks. "Do you think it'll stop hurting, then? It won't."

"**You don't know that!**"

"It's like scratching a bug bite," Izuku says, ignoring him. "You think you're making it better, but you're only making it worse so you can't stop."

"**I don't *care*!**" Okumura's voice scrapes like knives in his ears. "**He has to pay.**"

“Why does it matter so much to you?

“**He killed me!**” Okumura roars. “**I didn’t want** to fig**ht anymore… I d**idn’t w**ant to *die*.**” His form flickers back and forth, between the man he was and the nightmare he now is. “**I didn’t have to die, he didn’t have to do that! Is it** so wrong **to just want him to know that?**”

Izuku considers that for a moment. “Yes,” he answers.

Okumura’s eyes flash. “**You—”**

“It’s wrong for *you*,” Izuku tells him.

“**You don’t know anything about me!**” Okumura lashes out, and Izuku hops back out of reach as Rei shoves herself between them. Okumura rages on, heedless. “**Don’t you understand? All I want—all I want is for him to know what he did. To know it was wrong.**” He shrinks in on himself. “**It *was* wrong. Wasn’t it? I didn’t have to die.**”

“He’s the one who hurt you,” Izuku says softly.

“**That’s what I’ve been saying!**”

“Then why are you trusting him to make you feel better?”

“**I *don’t* trust him!**”

“Then why’d you make it so the only way you’ll feel better is if *he* does something for you?” Izuku demands.

Okumura goes quiet at that. He seems to settle, and for the first time he looks more man than monster. “**I *didn’t…*** I didn’t make it this way.”

“Maybe,” Izuku says, trying to sound firm. “But you don’t have to keep it this way. You *shouldn’t* keep it this way.”

Okumura stares at him. His face keeps shifting, as if he can’t decide whether he wants to look angry or sad or frustrated or helpless.

“You can’t wait around for him to be sorry,” Izuku says. He’s quiet now. This isn’t something that’s meant to be shouted. “Maybe he’ll never be sorry. Maybe he doesn’t know he did anything wrong, or he doesn’t care. It doesn’t matter.” Cautiously he takes a step forward. “You can’t depend on the people who hurt you to be the ones to make

it better, or it's never going to get better. They'll only disappoint you, or hurt you even worse, and then they'll be gone and you'll be waiting forever."

Okumura doesn't move away. He's quiet for long enough that Izuku isn't sure he'll answer at all, but finally he shifts, like he's taking a deep breath that he doesn't need. "I don't want to wait forever," he whispers.

Izuku touches his arm. It's as cold as any ghost's, and Okumura twitches but doesn't pull away. "Then don't. Move on by yourself. Leave him behind. Can you do that?"

"I don't know."

"I think you can do it," Izuku tells him. "You don't have to pass on. Not if you aren't ready. But I think you can leave him behind. I think you can be happy again, without his help."

Okumura stares at him like Izuku is the strangest thing he's ever seen in his life—and death. "I'll… I can try," he says at length. "I think? I'll try."

"Thank you," Izuku says, and means it.

"I think…" Okumura's form wavers, and finally settles. He looks younger like this, without all the rage twisting him into something monstrous. "I need to think about this."

"That's fine. You should." Izuku tilts his head to the side. "Just leave Todoroki alone, okay? He didn't do anything to you."

"…All right." Okumura slumps. "All right, fine. You win." He vanishes before Izuku can get another word out.

Rei's floating high enough off the ground that she can reach out and touch his face. Her fingertips are ice-cold as they brush his cheek, and Izuku notices, for the first time, the wet salty track down the right side of his face. There might have been an identical one down the other, if it weren't for the bandages.

"It's okay," Izuku whispers. "I'm okay. Just crying again. You know me. Happens all the time."

Rei hugs him tightly all the same.

Chapter End Notes

CW: Mentions of past bullying, child abuse, self blame, and death by law enforcement.

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

MORE ART

The-creepy-unicorn on Tumblr is back at it again with some lovely drawings of Shouto and Mika.

And Franqiworld drew a lovely Izuku surrounded by his ghosts.

Thanks, you two! If anyone else has cool art, posts, or what have you, the tag I use on tumblr for this fic is "deku sees dead people". Don't be shy about showing me anything! Trust me. If it's MS Paint stick figures I will love it and reblog it and share it with anyone who sits still long enough to listen.

The tears are just beginning to subside when Ms. Shimura pops into view abruptly in their midst, startling both of them.

“Heya, kiddo,” she greets him. Her voice is light, extra-gentle when she sees his tears. “Just wanted to give you a heads-up in case you were doing something important—Toshi’s coming.” She claps Izuku on the back. “Hey, I dunno if I said it loud enough earlier, but you did good out there.”

“Thanks,” he says, sniffling. “Do you think it got your friend’s attention? Gran Torino?”

“If your little brawl in the ring didn’t, then the finale certainly did.” Ms. Shimura chuckles. “Don’t you worry about ol’ Gran. He’s a crotchety old bastard but he knows when he needs to shift himself. He’ll turn up.”

“Good,” Izuku murmurs, right as he hears his teacher’s familiar footsteps approach. He’s still crying a little when All-Might appears around the corner, and he hears his mentor sigh as he finishes wiping his face on his arm.

“You really do cry too much, my boy,” All-Might says, gently chiding. “Everything all right?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Izuku says. “Just got a little emotional.” He sniffs one

last time and stands taller. Now that he thinks of it, he does have one more order of business. “I was about to grab my cat and head home, but I wanted to ask you something.”

They start walking together, Izuku heading in the direction of the room where he left Mika with Todoroki. All-Might walks at his side, hunched and slightly unsteady in his true form. “What was it, my boy?”

“How do *you* think I did?” Izuku asks. “Before the part where my arm broke—I know everything after that was a mess.”

A smile plays about All-Might’s gaunt face. “Not too badly,” he says. “Not too badly at all. You have speed and power even without your quirk, and you have an eye for finding openings. That’s good.” Izuku nods, paying close attention. “On the other hand, you’re not quite fast enough that you don’t telegraph your movements. You have a tendency to swing wide—an experienced fighter could predict you just by watching your chest.”

“My chest?” Izuku glances down.

“Exactly. It’s not quite as much of a problem with full access to One For All—your speed and strength increase to an even greater extent. But in this world, when strength and speed and prescience and what have you are par for the course, it’s better not to rely on quirks alone.” His teeth flash in a grin, and he winks. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

Izuku finds himself smiling back.

All-Might hangs back out of sight when Izuku darts in to retrieve Mika. Todoroki is quiet, watching him through his bangs like he isn’t sure where they stand, but he looks a lot less wretched than he did before. Mika’s claws catch in Todoroki’s shirt when Izuku takes her back, and he mutters out a sheepish apology.

“Thanks,” he says, at the same time as Todoroki says the exact same thing. He nods, tucks Mika under his good arm again, and leaves.

All-Might spends the rest of their time together carefully critiquing his fighting style, with Ms. Shimura chiming in unseen and unheard, whenever he pauses long enough for her to get a word in edgewise. Izuku listens, taking in their advice hungrily. He doesn’t have anything to write with, and his dominant hand is out of commission anyway; he takes out his phone and types notes into an e-mail draft, just to remind himself so he can write it all down later. The sun is

starting to go down by the time they finally part ways. Izuku trades goodbye texts with Uraraka, Kirishima, Tsuyu, and a few of his other classmates.

Iida is strangely silent, though. He must be busy with something.

Izuku is finally leaving for home, with a cat on his shoulder and Rei clinging to his hand, when a breath of cold air makes him glance back.

“Don’t know what you said to him,” Hino drawls. “But you actually got him to pipe down so good job. Okumura, I mean. So. Point to you, I guess.” He drifts along, slightly behind and to the side of Izuku. “Oh, and you threw shade at Endeavor. Another point to you. Most people, they see anything, they mind their damn business. But you? You’ve got stones.”

“Not really,” Izuku says. “Just no shame.”

Hino laughs. “Well aren’t you a kid after my own heart. Nothing to say about me and my harmless little pranks, I hope?”

Izuku stops and turns to face him. “Not really,” he says. “As long as you aren’t hurting anyone.”

“Who, me?” Hino puts on an expression of pure innocence. “Not a fly. I just like to make the bastard’s life a little harder, that’s all.”

“And that’s fine,” Izuku says. “I can understand that.”

“Cool. Why the serious face, then?”

“Don’t get Todoroki in trouble with him,” Izuku says. “If you make him angry and he takes it out on Todoroki, I won’t be happy.”

Hino rolls his eyes. “Don’t lose sleep over it, kid. I already have Suzuki on my case about that—and unlike you, I can’t get away from her, and she doesn’t have lungs so she doesn’t need to take a breath or a break when she talks to me.” He scowls. “Besides, I’m not like Okumura. My beef is with Endeavor, and his kids have nothing to do with it. And before you ask, no, it’s none of your damn business, so don’t ask.”

“Okay.” Izuku can roll his eyes, too. “Wasn’t going to. I don’t really care.” That’s not quite true, but something about Hino makes Izuku feel like being flippant. It must work, because he gets the last word, and Hino leaves him to a quiet trip home.

Mom all but tackles him when he walks through the door. He expects a worried scolding, and receives one. It's all he can do to talk her down from an absolute conniption fit when she sees the bandaging over his eye. The ghosts are a little more sedate about things; Ms. Morino and Mrs. Matsuda greet him cheerfully as he comes in, and even Kurosawa peeks out from the hallway before vanishing back to who knows where. To most ghosts, if you aren't dead then everything else can be fixed and isn't worth worrying about.

"My eye's fine," he assures his mother for at least the fifth time, as he offers what help he can with setting the table. "My face just got a little scratched up, that's all."

She huffs at him, still not convinced even when dinner is in front of them. She fills his plate for him, ignoring his protests that he can manage with one arm. "But why did you keep fighting?" she asks, her voice pitched with disapproval. "Even on the TV I could see that you couldn't use your arm anymore! Couldn't you have stopped? Forfeited before it got any worse?"

"No—well." Izuku hesitates, pretending that using chopsticks with his left hand is more of a problem than it really is. "I mean. Yeah, but…"

"Then why didn't you? It was only a contest, wasn't it? Why didn't you stop?"

Izuku pokes at his food as he tries to think of a way to explain himself without blurting out Todoroki's life story at the dinner table. Something tells him Todoroki doesn't want him shooting his mouth off about it. "You know how sometimes, when I'm talking to ghosts, I'll meet some who're… troublesome?"

She blanches a little at this. "Y-yes…?" She hasn't seen the worst of them, but she's seen how skittish he gets when the dead get pushy and mean. And beyond that, there are some things that can't and won't be forgotten.

"But sometimes—well, *always*—when they're like that, it means they just… need help," Izuku goes on. "Even if it's scary to help them. That's what I do, remember? Like you said… when I talk to ghosts, I can help people that nobody else knows to help." He looks down at his food again. "It was sort of like that. He needed help. And when my arm broke, I couldn't stop because I wasn't done."

She sighs heavily. "Izuku… I know you like helping people."

“Like” is probably the wrong word. He does enjoy it most of the time, and he’s never regretted helping anyone before, but saying he likes it makes it sound more like a hobby than the nearly physical need it really is.

“And I’m proud of you,” she goes on. “Never forget that I’m proud of you for that. And I know being a hero is all you’ve ever wanted. But… you can’t *always* put others before yourself.”

“Heroes have to be selfless, don’t they?” Izuku asks softly.

Her hand thumps sharply on the table. “It’s not about being selfish,” she says, her voice surprisingly sharp. “It’s just about staying healthy. It’s about taking proper care of yourself so you can do things like—like leap tall buildings and rescue people and what have you. How are you supposed to do all that if you keep injuring yourself right off?”

Izuku blinks, and finds that he doesn’t have an answer for that. All he has is a weird sense of deja vu before he remembers—Aizawa scolded him for this exact thing on the first day of school. And they’re right—he can’t save anyone if his first resort makes him one more casualty.

“I’ll be more careful,” he says quietly. “I promise, Mom.” He feels his face flush with embarrassment. “All-Might kind of wasn’t happy about it, either.”

“Thank goodness for that,” she says.

“He gave me some good advice,” Izuku goes on. “On fighting, and stuff.”

“Yes, I noticed—at the beginning, when you were fighting that boy,” she says. “Who—did I hear right? Was that *Endeavor’s* son?”

Rei growls softly, and the lights flicker. Izuku tries not to bristle. “His name’s Todoroki,” he says.

“Well, I have to say,” his mother says. “I’ve never seen you fight like that.”

Izuku looks up from his plate. “In… in a good way, or a bad way?”

“A good way, I suppose.” She smiles ruefully. “You really held your own out there, for a while. Have you been learning that at school?”

“Some,” Izuku says. “Mostly Ms. Shimura’s been helping me.”

“Oh.” Mom sounds surprised. “Is that one of your teachers?”

With a jolt, he realizes that he’s never actually mentioned Ms. Shimura to her. It’s not out of any desire to keep things from her; the subject just hasn’t ever come up. “Not officially,” he says. “Actually, she’s one of my ghosts.” He pauses. “Well, not really *my* ghost?” With another moment of hesitation, he wonders how much he should reveal, and shrugs inwardly. This is mostly his secret, and Mom has been in on it for years already. “She’s sort of All-Might’s ghost, actually.”

Mom’s eyes widen at this. “All-Might has a ghost?”

“I was kind of surprised, too,” he admits. “She was there when I first met him, and I’ve hardly ever seen him without seeing her, too. I still don’t really know who she was—she won’t tell me, and All-Might’s never mentioned her. But I think she might’ve been a friend of his.” His voice trails off. He’s fairly sure she was a hero herself, and if she is and she died in the line of duty, well… that’s just more evidence of how dangerous the hero life really is. “Anyway, she’s pretty tough, and she’s been showing me how to fight.”

“Well, I’m glad she’s so helpful,” Mom says. “Does she know anything about… about your quirk? Your new one, I mean.”

“I think so. I mean, if she’s been following All-Might around then she has to. But I don’t know if she can really teach me how to use it.”

“Too bad,” she sighs. “You’ll just have to pick All-Might’s brain a little more.”

“Oh, I plan to. I’ll try and pick Ms. Shimura’s brains, too. I’ll bet anything she knows *something*.”

“Well, she sounds nice.”

Izuku snorts around his mouthful. “She keeps ragging on me for being short.”

Mom giggles at this, and the laughter eases her worry lines.

Elsewhere, another tired young student has a somewhat less pleasant evening.

It’s late when Shouto can finally collapse into bed. Unfortunately, he’s

just exhausted enough to do so facedown, only to flip over with a groan of pain, both hands pressed gingerly against his face. The splint is still in place, and he's under strict orders from Recovery Girl to leave his nose alone and ice it if it starts swelling again.

He's also under strict orders to rest, and honestly he would have loved to, but after his loss today, his father saw fit to squeeze in one more training session after he got home.

Simply put, he's *exhausted*, though at least his aching body is finally balanced—he hurts on both sides now. Everything hurts, and it's a good thing there's one more weekend day left because it's only going to be worse tomorrow.

He's not sure where his silver medal is. Probably in the trash somewhere; the old man's pretty sore about him coming in second. But that's fine. It didn't mean much to him. He didn't really want it anyway.

There are things that feel more important to him. Like having a good night's sleep, and trying to figure himself out all over again, after today.

Like maybe, visiting his mother tomorrow.

Sleep first, if he can manage it. He's exhausted, but the thoughts in his head are tied into messy Gordian knots that may very well keep him up no matter how heavy his entire body is, never mind his eyelids.

Tap tap.

Shouto sits bolt upright on his futon. He's on his feet in half a second, cold air gathering at his right hand as he whips around to face the would-be intruder.

He sees the face watching him from outside his bedroom window, and his mouth drops open. His hand falls to his side.

It takes a moment for his mouth to start working again.

"What."

Tap tap tap. It's the sound of a padded paw rapping at his window as its owner stares at him expectantly through a single blue eye.

It can't be.

Shouto crosses the room, hesitates as he listens for any sounds indicating that his father might be coming to check on him, and finally opens the window.

It can't be anyone else. Shouto doubts there are a lot of cats in the city with one blue eye, faded calico fur, and a bright purple collar with a familiar silver tag. She steps daintily through his open window and leaps down to land lightly on his bedroom floor, before immediately turning around to rub herself against his ankle.

"What are you doing here?" he hisses as quietly as he can, which is pointless and stupid because he's risking alerting his father in order to talk to an animal that isn't about to talk back. "He'll skin you alive if he catches you in here!"

Mika seats herself at his feet and gazes up at him, and that's just not fair. A one-eyed cat should not be that cute. There must be some kind of rule that's breaking.

Shouto stares back, at a complete loss for what to do with this. When it becomes clear to Mika that there's no petting forthcoming, she turns and pads over to make herself at home on his pillow.

He covers his face—carefully, so as not to press his injured nose—and ponders his life and his choices that have led up to this moment. It's official. He's lost control of his life.

Sleep is, sadly, postponed. Shouto fumbles out his phone, and realizes belatedly that he has no idea how to contact Midoriya.

Luckily, both class reps traded numbers with everyone shortly after the election. Text messages to Iida yield no results, but he gets lucky when Yaoyorozu gets back to him and offers up the phone number without asking for too many details.

[11:28] Shouto:
Where is your cat right now.

[11:29] Midoriya:
??????

[11: 29] Shouto:
This is Todoroki. Do you know where your cat is right now.

[11: 31] Midoriya:
no??? i've been looking for her for like an hour, she slips out

sometimes.
wait why

[11:32] Shouto:
Photo sent.

[11:32] Midoriya:
??????!!!!!???

[11:32] Shouto:
Midoriya why is your cat commandeering my futon.
How did your cat find out where I live.

[11:33] Midoriya:
that
is an excellent question that i dont know the answer to
i am so sorry wait this isn't going to get you int rouble is it??

[11: 34] Shouto:
I don't think so. I'm pretty sure he's done with me for the day.
My door has a lock so at least if he tries to bother me in the morning
I'll have time to hide her or get her back out the window.

[11:35] Midoriya:
i am so, so sorry about this.

[11:36] Shouto:
Just text me your address so I can bring her tomorrow morning. I'll be there by 8.

Midoriya does so, and Shouto turns back to the interloper sprawled comfortably over his pillow. Thank God she isn't making too much noise. He carefully locks his door. His father won't be happy if he tries to open it, but he'll be a lot less happy if he barges in and finds Shouto hiding a cat in his room.

"You're causing me a lot of trouble," he mutters as he sits back down on his futon, legs crossed. Mika responds by climbing into his lap and making herself comfortable in the V of his left leg. Resigned, he pets her. "Weird cat. Guess that makes sense, if you're Midoriya's." She purrs at him, and he wonders if she recognizes her owner's name.

In the end, he's forced to share the futon. There's no arguing with a cat, especially a small, very soft cat sprawled over the left side of his chest and dulling the bone-deep ache with a steady purr. She's mostly hidden by the comforter, and his bedroom door is locked, so that's

about all he can do for precautions. At this point, he's too tired to care.

There's an upside to this. As it turns out, it's impossible to stay awake with a cat rumbling softly on his chest.

Shouto almost wakes up to a gentle, rhythmic pressing against his chest. It's not quite enough to wake him fully; the feeling is muffled through the comforter. He stirs, still mostly asleep, until the pressing stops, and a light headbutt to the chin brings him around. His eyes flutter open for a moment, only to stubbornly shut again.

The paw on his cheek is much more insistent. He opens his eyes, and finds Midoriya's one-eyed cat staring at him from inches away.

The moment she sees he's awake, she's immediately rubbing her head against the side of his face, rumbling softly all the while. Shouto knows his classmate Kouda can talk to animals, but he doesn't need a quirk like that to hear *Get up, get up,* in her insistent purring.

Still, getting woken up by a cat is a new experience, and it's certainly a better one than getting woken up by Endeavor abruptly opening his bedroom door, or knocking imperiously.

He sits up, all but dumping the cat into his lap in the process. She doesn't seem to mind, and continues to get underfoot as he gets up to change into fresh clothes. He checks his phone; his alarm's set to go off seven minutes from now. Apparently, Mika has other plans for him.

His body still aches from the previous day, though not as much as he was dreading. The worst of it is in his ribs and his still-healing nose, but at least he isn't tearing up with every move—he used to do that early on in his training.

Once dressed, he scoops up the thankfully quiet cat and deposits her on the other side of his dresser. Then, listening carefully, he unlocks his door, cracks it open just enough to fit his head through, and checks the hallway outside.

Muted footsteps reach his ears, but they don't alarm him; the sound of his sister's approach is vastly different from his father's. He'd much rather Fuyumi catch him than Endeavor; she keeps her mouth shut.

"Morning, Shouto." Fuyumi yawns as she pads down the hallway.

“Coast is clear—dad went out early today, so you’re in the clear.”

Shouto physically sags. “Oh thank God.”

His sister pauses, blinking at him. She considers him for a moment. “Okay, what did you do?”

“Nee-san—”

“Look, just tell me what you did so we can come up with a good alibi before he gets home.”

“*I* didn’t do anything,” Shouto says acidly, and at that moment he feels claws catch in his pant leg against his calf. Before he can get another word out, Mika scales him like a tree trunk and perches on his left shoulder.

Fuyumi blinks again, and then bursts out laughing.

With a sigh, Shouto straightens up and opens his door fully. He can feel Mika vibrating on his shoulder, her tail curling against the back of his neck. “I can explain,” he says, once Fuyumi isn’t laughing too hard to listen to him.

“Oh, please do,” Fuyumi giggles, her hand pressed to her mouth. “I want to hear about this.”

“For some reason, one of my classmates brought his cat to the Sports Festival,” he says. “Though—considering the circumstances, I guess she followed him. I don’t know. I wasn’t paying attention.”

“Naturally.” Fuyumi’s voice shakes with held-back mirth.

He doesn’t bother glaring at her. “After all the events were over, he dropped his cat in my lap and vanished for about fifteen minutes before coming back for her. And then last night, she showed up at my window.”

“Aww, you’ve been adopted.” Fuyumi steps closer. “Is she friendly?”

“I think so,” he says, remembering how she she tried to take a finger when Endeavor came too close.

But Mika lets Fuyumi pet her, and his sister is instantly charmed. “Oh aren’t you pretty,” she says softly. “Poor thing, what happened to your eye?”

“And anyway, I need to take her back,” Shouto finishes. “If *he* calls or comes back, don’t tell him where I am.”

“Of course.” Fuyumi smiles, and steps aside when he moves past her to get his shoes. “Hey, Shouto?”

He looks back. “Yeah?”

“I’m glad you’re making friends.”

“…I wouldn’t go that far,” he says. It’s hard to consider someone a friend after you’ve nearly beaten each other into unconsciousness, without feeling presumptuous.

Thankfully, the trip isn’t too far, and Mika behaves herself on the way. She’s pretty content to glue herself to his left side and purr. A few people on the train compliment “his” cat, and he’s frankly too emotionally tired to correct them.

He sends a text to Midoriya when he’s nearly there.

[7:25] Shouto:
Are you awake? I have your cat.

He half expects his classmate to still be asleep; it’s almost seven-thirty by now, and he’s well aware that not everyone is willing to get up early on a Sunday. But no, Midoriya answers promptly.

[7:25] Midoriya:
yes! thanks for doing this! and again im really sorry i have no idea how she found you

Shouto double-checks the address to make sure he’s at the right building. It’s… normal-looking. He’s not sure what he expected. Midoriya was normal-looking, too, but that didn’t stop him from turning out to be… well, *Midoriya*. He’s never been to a classmate’s house before, and the fact that his first time is going to be this particular classmate under these particular circumstances is… he’s not sure how to describe it. Or how to feel about it, beyond “unreasonably nervous”. Still, he walks up the steps to the right door and raises his hand to knock.

A feeling takes him, like cold air on the back of his neck. Behind him, the steps creak, and a soft whispery noise reaches his ears. There’s a feeling he gets whenever he’s not the only person in a room, and he’s getting that feeling now. He tenses on instinct, and looks over his

shoulder to see who's sneaking up on him.

No one there.

He shakes his head, annoyed with himself. Why is he getting skittish in broad daylight in a perfectly good neighborhood like this? Just because Midoriya's a little odd doesn't mean he lives in a haunted building or something. Mentally shaking himself, he knocks.

The door opens, and Midoriya stands there with his arm still bandaged, and what looks like fresh gauze on his face. The shadows under his eyes are deep and dark, though Shouto's pretty sure that's how they normally are.

"Hello," Shouto says, and Mika wriggles in his arms until he carefully holds her out.

"Hey. Uh, thanks." Midoriya hooks his good arm under his cat and takes her back. "And—sorry, again."

"It's fine," Shouto says. He's lost count of how many times Midoriya has apologized to him. "My father left early this morning without noticing her, so… no harm done."

"That's good." Somewhere within the apartment behind Midoriya, a door slams. His classmate barely bats an eye, tosses a cursory glance over his shoulder, and shrugs.

"Is this a bad time, or…?" Shouto's voice trails off.

"Nah, that was a draft."

"Oh."

They stand there awkwardly for a few moments. Shouto can't stop shooting glances at Midoriya's bandaged eye, and Midoriya keeps looking at Shouto's face, too. His nose is still in its splint. He feels unreasonably skittish, being here. The atmosphere feels tense and heavy, and Shouto wracks his brain frantically for a way to excuse himself. Maybe if he'd practiced this on the way and come up with a working script in his head, it wouldn't have been so *awkward*—

Midoriya snorts with quiet laughter.

It takes Shouto by surprise, and he can only stare openly as Midoriya tries and fails to hold it back, and then resorts to snickering quietly

into his cat's fur.

It's a moment before the outburst subsides. "Sorry." Midoriya clears his throat and coughs, but the corners of his mouth are still twitching. "I just—we really messed each other up, didn't we?"

Shouto blinks at him. "And that's… funny?"

Midoriya sobers. "Well… maybe not. It kind of is… if you think about it."

"Oh." Shouto stares. Is this a good time to leave?

"I mean—" Midoriya shuts his eyes. "Okay, look. I just wanted to say that, um, things got a little… personal. During the match. And, um." He cringes a little. "I said some things that were probably kind of, um, hurtful? Like that thing about you, g-getting in on a recommendation, a-and that was a really… not a good thing to say? So I don't really blame you for losing your temper, it was completely—"

"It still isn't good to lose my temper during a fight," Shouto interrupts him. "And besides, you didn't say anything that wasn't true."

"I-I guess." Midoriya gives Mika's ears a scratch. "Still felt kind of wrong to say it, so… yeah." His eyes flicker up to Shouto's face for a moment. "Um, are we… cool?"

"What?"

"I-I'm just asking, because, you know, like I said we really messed each other up, and I'd rather it didn't, um… make us… enemies or anything." Midoriya shifts from foot to foot.

"I don't think of you as an enemy," Shouto tells him. Maybe a rival at one point, but… now he's not so sure. It makes his head spin, trying to balance between not being the person his father is, and making his choices without thinking of the old bastard at every fork in the road.

"Oh. Uh, good." Midoriya lets Mika climb onto his shoulders. "…Do you ever have free time after school?"

The question catches him off guard. "What?" Shouto blinks. "Well… sometimes, yes. Mondays and Wednesdays are usually active for pro heroes, so my father's too busy to pull me into a training session. Why?"

“Want to spar?”

Shouto gapes at him.

“I-it’s fine if you say no!” Midoriya says quickly. “I was just thinking… well, I’m pretty new to, um. Fighting. And I’m learning, but, y’know, practice makes perfect and everything, and you’re really good at it, so maybe… you could… help me?” He looks a little less eerily pale, but only because he’s flushing with embarrassment.

Shouto raises an eyebrow at him. “Are you sure?”

His classmate shrugs. “Should I not be?”

“We might get in trouble for training without supervision.”

Midoriya looks at him like that’s the densest thing Shouto could have said. “Not if we don’t use our quirks.”

“True.” It takes him a little by surprise, hearing that. His father’s spent so much time pushing him to strengthen his quirk that practicing fighting without it is an odd thought.

Could be useful, though. Aizawa-sensei can’t be the only one out there with quirk-disrupting powers.

“My arm should finish healing up pretty soon,” Midoriya says. “So maybe, if you’re interested?”

“All right,” Shouto says.

Midoriya’s eye lights up. “Really?”

“Sure.” Shouto shrugs. “I could always use the practice.” *Low-stakes practice,* he thinks. Without the constant pressure to meet the old bastard’s standards.

It would be a *relief*.

“Oh, cool!” Midoriya grins at him. For the first time, it looks like an actual smile, rather than a thin disguise over something deeply unsettling. “I’ll, uh, I guess we’ll talk more about that later, but, thanks. And thanks for bringing my cat back.”

“It was no trouble.” Shouto steps back, seeing a chance to end the conversation smoothly. “I’ll see you in class.”

“Yeah. See you around, Todoroki.”

The door shuts gently behind Shouto as he leaves. Something cold brushes by him, like an errant breeze. It almost sounds like a whisper by his ear, or several, but when he looks around, there’s no one there.

“Hey, come on,” Izuku scolds Rei gently when she comes back inside, and the air shimmers with her susurrant laughter. “Leave him alone—it’s not nice to tease someone who can’t see you.

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

I have more art to share!

iguessso12 on Tumblr made some lovely pictures of Rei, including a stab at what she might have looked like when she was alive.

And randomness-is-my-motto drew this absolutely beautiful piece of Izuku.

Thanks so much guys, these are wonderful!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Izuku sits on his bed, breathes, and thinks.

He hasn't had the chance to do this yet—sit and be silent and think. It's not always an easy thing for him. In years past, he has been on the move constantly, chasing after hero battles or favors to the dead, following the news feed on his phone or the whispers of ghosts. Most recently he has added training to his life, and in the past few weeks he has lived and breathed with the Sports Festival hovering in the back of his mind. But it's over now; after two days, it's over, and he's home and it's quiet. So Izuku turns his mind to something he hasn't had time to think about since yesterday.

That's not his fault—yesterday never paused. He was fighting, then chasing ghosts, then fighting again, then chasing and worrying and spitting threats and dropping cats in his classmates' laps. And then he was home, Mika vanished, Todoroki contacted him, and even now he barely remembers crashing into bed.

But now, it's quiet. Now, Rei sits quietly nearby and plays with Mika. His phone is off, the news feed cut to keep out distractions. Izuku thinks about his fight the previous day.

Not his fight with Todoroki. The one before that.

He thinks of the limb-locking nightmare that is Shinsou's quirk. He

thinks of that prison, of knowing even for those briefest of moments exactly what it means to be someone's puppet.

He thinks of words in his head. Not like the voices of the dead—those he can hear the same as any other. These were like thoughts that weren't his, words forming in his mind as he fought to break free.

He thinks, *Hello?*

The only answering noise in his mind is his own.

Are you still there? Can you hear me? Can you let me hear you?

No answer. None at all.

"Rei," he says softly. She looks up. "Before you broke me out of Shinsou's control, did you… hear anything? Like voices?" He hesitates. "Not the voices of the crowd. But like… people talking to me?"

She shakes her head. Her dark eyes are wide.

"Yeah, I didn't think so." He sits back, legs crossed. "I heard something. Like people talking to each other—I'm not sure how many. It was quiet, though. Quieter than most ghosts. I don't know if they knew I could hear them."

Her hands move to speak. "What did they say?" she asks.

"Not much. Mostly commenting on how I got myself mind-controlled." Izuku snorts quietly. "About how it was a hard lesson. And a good thing it happened in a contest instead of a real fight." He goes quietly thoughtful again, brows knitted together in a frown. "And one of them… one of them said something strange."

Rei leans forward curiously.

"He said something like, 'Better now than against my brother.' Or she. It was hard to tell, it could've been anyone. Too quiet to tell the difference. I couldn't even tell how many there were." The words are scarcely out of his mouth when he remembers—smoke and haze in his vision, forming vague shapes. "Wait… seven of them, maybe. Or… eight? Somewhere around there. I saw something, too. I saw something and heard something, and they were talking about me. It was like nothing I've ever seen before. Or heard."

With a sigh, he flops backward on his bed and nearly knocks his head into the wall.

“And that’s crazy,” he says. “I’ve been living with his power my whole life. You’d think it couldn’t surprise me anymore.”

And then Rei is hovering into view, her dark hair hanging down toward his face. “Then maybe it isn’t,” her hands say.

“Isn’t what?”

“What if it’s not the power you’ve had your whole life?” she asks. “What if it’s the one you just got?”

Izuku stares up at her, speechless. For a moment he thinks, no, that can’t be it. What does a quirk that enhances his strength and speed have to do with seeing visions and hearing voices? And it’s not like he’s flying blind; All-Might would know about it, and wouldn’t he have mentioned something? This is a quirk that’s passed down, and…

It’s passed down. It amasses power from its wielders.

…*Oh.*

“One For All,” he whispers, half to himself. “It accumulates the strength of each person who has it, and then…” His mouth hangs half open. “What if strength isn’t the only thing that gets passed down?”

“Ask him?” Rei suggests.

“Who?” He looks at her again. “All-Might? I… I don’t know, Rei.” He stares past her at the ceiling. “It could be both of my quirks working at the same time. Maybe it comes from One For All, but I can only hear it because of…” His voice trails off. He’s never bothered to name his quirk before. “If this is because of my original quirk, then this isn’t something he can help me with. But…” Thoughtfully he presses his lips together. “I think I should ask him about the people who have held One For All in the past, at least. That could shed some light. And maybe Ms. Shimura’s heard something. She’s been following him for long enough, I bet.”

He watches the ceiling, and he looks at Rei, deep in thought even as Mika walks across his stomach to curl up on his chest. “I wonder what that means, though. ‘Better now than against my brother.’ Whose brother?”

Rei shrugs.

He's anxious for Monday now. His arm will be better by then, and maybe he can take this stupid gauze off his face, too. There are people he can talk to, both living and dead. There are questions he can ask, and hopefully answers he can find. All-Might has promised to help him understand One For All, and that ought to help with half of this mystery. For the rest, well… no one knows Izuku's original quirk better than Izuku does. It's not like mysterious voices and visions are anything new.

But at the same time, he knows this isn't ghosts. Even spirits have more substance than this. But… but it's *something*. Maybe. If he's right.

Am I right? he thinks.

Nothing answers.

The apartment building has seen better days.

At least, Nana assumes it has. Every building was new at some point. There has to be something there first, for it to reach the point of shabby.

Torino always did pride himself on humility. Which, now that she thinks of it, is a bit of an oxymoron.

She enters unhindered. Legends about the power of thresholds are a bit exaggerated to her knowledge, but it wouldn't matter anyway. This isn't the kind of place anyone would call home. It's the sort of quiet place that's only quiet because anyone in hearing range is too scared to make a lot of noise. At best, it's a place to sleep.

He isn't hard to find, as small as he is. He used to cut at least as imposing a figure as Toshi does now, but age has shrunken him. He's as tough as a gnarled snag, wrinkled and scarred but too stubborn to crack or blow over. He used to scowl when she grinned and grumble when she joked, a bullheaded old curmudgeon with a tough outer layer covering his well-hidden mushy little heart.

Very well hidden. But that didn't make it any less real.

Take now, for instance.

Now, he sits on the couch with a plate of cold taiyaki and a sheet of

paper on the table in front of him. His phone is in his hands but from the looks of it he's already hung up, and he's only toying with it now. His teeth are clenched, his jaw set. She can almost see veins pulsing in his forehead.

"That bastard," he says under his breath to an empty apartment. "That…" A short sigh, sharp and angry in the quiet. He grips the phone with white knuckles. The way he tosses it aside is an aggressive sort of carelessness. "Did it again. Poor young bastard." He shakes his head, and some of the anger in him gives way. It always does when he thinks no one's watching. It parts like a curtain, and sadness peeks through with no one but a dead woman to see it. "Son of a bitch."

"Hey, old friend." He's deaf to her greeting, but it makes her feel better to say it anyway. "What's got you in a tiff, I wonder?" She sits beside him, and the couch doesn't dip beneath her. "Hope you won't take it out on the kid too bad."

No answer, of course. Nana looks to the coffee table again, and the paper is close enough that she can identify it. It's a form for official nomination—agencies use them when scouting out hero trainees who show promise. They always come out after the Yuuei Sports Festivals. This one's blank, but the pen is well within Gran Torino's reach.

Nana lets herself have a quiet little chuckle. "So you were paying attention after all, huh? Good. Thought you might." She glances sidelong at her old friend. "Did you notice? Did you see the way he fought?" His face gives nothing away. "Did you see anything of me in it?"

Her old friend picks up the pen. His brow furrows, and he glares down at the form.

Nana watches him, watches the pen that he grips in his fingers. "I'm sorry," she says. "I feel like it isn't fair to you, pulling you back into this again. Arm-twisting you from beyond the grave. But… Toshi needs your help again." Spectral fingers curl into fists in her lap. "Izuku could use it too."

"I know what you're going to say," she goes on, though really he isn't going to say anything. "I should be doing this myself, if I can. I should be more helpful. I should… I should *tell him*." She feels her eyes fill with tears. "I should. I would, if I were just a little less pitiful. But I just… I've left it too long, and now I don't know how to tell him. What will he say when he finds out?" Her vision blurs. "You think it's

nothing to worry about?" she asks, and shakes her head. "You should see him, Gran. You should see how he loves. When he loves, he does it with all his heart, and that boy loves Toshi. What will he think of the pitiful woman who went and abandoned him?"

She smiles through her tears, bright and painful. "I can't spit it out myself. All I can do is just… not stop him from asking you. I guess that's one more thing I'm leaving in your hands instead of taking care of myself, isn't it? I'm sorry." Her voice hitches. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Her apologies fall on deaf ears. The only sound that the living can hear is the quiet scratch of a pen on paper.

Izuku steps onto the train an hour earlier than normal.

His arm is out of the sling but still bandaged, and a good portion of the left side of his face is still covered in gauze. Recovery Girl left him with sternly-worded orders to pay her a visit before class, and after the blistering scolding he's already been subjected to, the last thing he wants to do is… well, anything besides exactly what she told him.

People are staring at him as he takes a seat. Not that they're being blatant about it—Izuku only catches quick, brief glances from the surrounding passengers. He doesn't blame them; the bandaging on his arm is just visible where his jacket sleeve doesn't cover his wrist, and for all they know he could be missing an eye.

Izuku takes out his phone.

As early as it is, he can't really be sure anyone else is up yet. Only one of his friends is remotely likely to be awake right now.

[6:41] Izuku:
morning iida :P
might actually beat you to class today

He waits, but there's no answer forthcoming.

Weird, he thinks, and then he mentally shakes himself. Because it's not weird at all for someone to still be asleep at ass o'clock in the

morning. It's not like Iida got beat up bad enough to need an appointment with Recovery Girl. Izuku only hopes he hasn't woken him up by accident.

He's about to switch to a news app when a throat clears somewhere above him. He looks up, instantly wary for no reason he can articulate, and finds a sleepy-eyed salaryman holding on to a suspended handle and looking straight at him.

"You're a Yuuei student, aren't you?" the man asks.

Izuku double-checks that he's alive before answering out loud. "Er, yes," he says. Rei doesn't seem bothered by him, so he deems it safe.

The man's face breaks out in a grin. "Thought so. I recognized you from the Sports Festival." More people are looking now. Izuku does a quick scan around at the faces watching openly or shooting glances. Most of them seem friendly. No one's hostile, that he can tell. But still, he feels his nerves kick in. It's not fear (well, it is—it's always fear) but more of a heightened sense of everything around him. There's no reason to feel so fenced in and wary, but he does. For a moment the walls and ceiling of the train car seem closer, and he has to take a moment to blink and shake himself free.

"Oh yeah, I recognize you!" someone else pipes up. "Weren't you the one that punched Endeavor's kid in the face?" Quiet laughter ripples through everyone within hearing range.

"Looks like he got you a good one too, didn't he?" the first speaker remarks. Izuku shrugs, and his face feels hot.

"Don't worry about it," one woman says, seeing the discomfort on his face. "I'm pretty sure a lot of people were rooting for you."

"I know I was."

"You're a tough kid, lasting that long against the son of the number-two hero."

"Everybody loves an underdog. You did good!"

"What was your name again? Midorima?"

"Midoriya," he corrects the last speaker. "Um. Thank you. You're very kind."

“You’re a scrappy little thing, Midoriya,” says the man who first mentioned the punch. “Endeavor’s son took out that one kid in five seconds flat, and you *still* almost beat him.”

Izuku puts on a smile. He tries to make it a normal, friendly smile, and not the eerily fixed one that he forces when he’s upset. No one gives him any weird looks, beyond a few sheepishly sympathetic grins, so he must be doing all right.

He can’t help but notice, in the back of his mind, that none of them bothered referring to Todoroki by name. It continues, as he bends an ear and listens in on side conversations. It’s always Endeavor’s son and Endeavor’s kid and the son of the number-two hero; it’s never Todoroki, and it’s certainly never Todoroki Shouto.

He’s starting to understand his classmate—friend?—just a little more.

It’s still early when he gets to school, and his pass lets him through the school’s security barrier without any trouble. There are a few other students on campus—dedicated class reps, early-morning tutoring students, and the like—but no one he recognizes. He catches a few stares, and assumes it’s the gauze.

If he’s a little timid when knocking on the door to Recovery Girl’s office, he can hardly be blamed.

“Oh good, you’re early,” she says as he steps inside. He breathes a sigh of relief; she seems to be in a much better mood. Less angry, at least. She takes a moment or two to fiddle with things at her desk before finally turning to him. If he didn’t know better, he’d think she was distracted.

On instinct, he looks to Rei. She’s always been sensitive to how people feel. And now, she’s frowning at the school nurse. She doesn’t look hostile, or even particularly upset. Just… thoughtful.

Briskly Recovery Girl checks over his arm, mouth twisting thoughtfully. She reapplies her quirk once more, and any lingering aches in his newly-healed bones vanish. “Hm. Well, it’s healed about as well as can be expected,” she remarks when she’s finished her assessment. “And luckily, you have a mostly-tame day today, if Aizawa is to be believed. Hold still while I check your eye.” He stoops a little to give her easier access to his face, and she gently peels the gauze off of it. Izuku tries not to wince at the itch-sting that comes when air touches his injury. A quick touch of Recovery Girl’s quirk wipes it away in a heartbeat. “There we are. Good as… well. Good as

it's going to get, I suppose."

Izuku reaches up to touch the skin beneath his eye without thinking. It doesn't hurt, but…

"I did tell you it was going to scar." Recovery Girl's voice is gently chiding. She moves back to her desk and sets about shuffling things on it. "It's not too bad. Noticeable, but you're hardly disfigured."

Curiosity overtakes him. Izuku glances around for the nearest mirror, and leans over to see his own face. True to Recovery Girl's word, Todoroki's ice punch has left its mark on him. The worst of it is the pale, jagged scarring right beneath his left eye. There's a little more on the side of his nose level with the eye, and his eyebrow has two nicks in it.

It's not terrible to look at. Certainly not as vivid as the burn scar on Todoroki's face. It's something he can live with.

"Don't preen *too* much," Recovery Girl says dryly. "Believe me, girls aren't nearly as keen on scars as some seem to think."

Rei tugs on his sleeve to get his attention. "She's worried about something," his friend signs to him. "She's hiding it, but she's worried."

"Is something wrong?" he asks softly.

"Hm?" Recovery Girl glances at him, still busying herself around the office. "Oh, just… news reports, you know. That… that Stain fellow has been… about."

Rei's hair stirs. Izuku is tempted to question her further, but something tells him he isn't going to get much out of her. "Oh. Well, do you need me for anything else?"

"No, you're free to go," she says. "And remember what I said to you before—I meant it. No more injuries like this, do you hear me?"

"Yes, ma'am." Izuku slips out of the office again and into the hall.

It's still quite early, but he might as well get to class. Iida will probably be there by now, and it'll be nice to catch up with him after a weekend of radio silence. As he makes his way through the halls, Izuku pulls out his phone and checks his news app for reports of Stain. There are quite a few of them, though details are fuzzy. Apparently he

struck again sometime over the weekend, but reporters are still waiting on definitive details.

That's… worrying. Usually, if the press is being held back from reporting on big hero-related stories, there's a reason for it. No wonder Recovery Girl's worried.

He reaches the 1-A class room and pushes the door open. "Morning, Iida—" His voice trails off when he finds himself talking to an empty room. "Huh. Well that's a first," he remarks to Rei. "I must be pretty early if I beat Iida to class." His voice is light, and there's no reason for it not to be light, but his heart feels heavy with dread and he doesn't know why.

Nothing for it. All he can do is set his bag down at his desk and wait for everyone else to arrive.

The news story breaks today.

Tenya wants to count himself lucky, really. Not everyone is this fortunate.

The story could have broken yesterday, or on Saturday. But the agency has been fighting tooth and nail to hold back the press, giving his family the time they need to brace themselves, shore up their defenses for the coming publicity storm.

Publicity. As if that's their biggest concern. As if privacy and convenience even register in Tenya's mind as something worth worrying about.

No, he has far greater concerns. Like coming to school, facing a bombardment of familiar faces and voices after turning off his phone for the past two days. Like limping through his duties as class representative—because nothing can get in the way of those. He can't let responsibility fall to the wayside just because—

Just because…

No.

He can do this. He can make it through the day. He can function like a human being and pretend that he isn't falling apart, that the sky isn't crumbling and his world isn't coming to an end. He can pretend that it… that it doesn't…

At least he still managed to arrive early. At least he has that. He can sit by himself in an empty classroom and gird himself to get through the day and get through the storm that will hit when the story breaks. He can do this.

He opens the door and steps into the classroom.

It's not empty.

Part of him screams silently, *Turn and run. Leave before he sees. Hide it before you give it away.*

The rest of him whispers, *It's just Midoriya.*

"Good morning, Iida!" his friend turns to look at him with a smile so bright that Tenya almost doesn't notice the scars around his eye. Before Tenya can properly steel himself and put on the front that he needs, their eyes meet, and he sees his friend's smile freeze.

He sees. He sees. Just one look and you already gave it away—

"Ah, good morning, Midoriya!" he greets, and forces a boisterous tone into his voice like his life depends on it. Midoriya is staring at him, smile gone cold and rapidly slipping from his face. His friend is on his feet, stepping away from his desk. "Sorry if I look a little under the weather! I had—a-a busy morning!" He smiles, and it *hurts*. "And goodness, I wasn't expecting you here so early! Is it a special occasion, or…?" Midoriya crosses the room, nearly kicking a desk out of the way. "Midoriya, is something—?"

He doesn't get any further, because Midoriya closes the distance between them in four more steps, and his arms are around Tenya's shoulders and pulling him into a rough hug before Tenya knows quite what is happening.

"M-Midoriya?" His heart gives a painful lurch. He freezes, not knowing what to do, what to say, how to react. "I-I… what are you…?"

Midoriya doesn't reply, unless tightening his arms around Tenya can be considered an answer.

How does he know?

How could he possibly—?

“I’m all right, you know,” Tenya says, and he’s a terrible liar. He can’t even keep his voice from cracking. “I’m quite… I’m…”

His vision blurs. He feels Midoriya’s hand against the back of his head, and he doesn’t know, he don’t know how he could have possibly given himself away so easily, but there are arms around him for the first time in what feels like far too long. He should pull back and step away before this goes on any longer, before someone else walks into class and sees, but there are arms around him and he *can’t*.

But he will. He’ll step back. He’ll brush Midoriya away and maybe, just maybe, ask his friend how he could possibly have known.

He will.

Just… later.

It’s a moment before Izuku feels Iida’s arms wrap hesitantly around him, like he isn’t sure it’s allowed. People are funny like that, when they’re hurting. They’re shy. You could take them in your arms, bend an ear to all their pain, and they’ll still shrink away like they think you’ll hate them for doing what you’ve invited them to do.

He should say something. *Anything.* There must be something he can say, something he can think of that…

No.

There really is nothing, is there.

He can’t talk anyway, because he knows that if he tries to talk, he’ll start crying. It’s bad enough that he’s done this much. It’s bad enough that Iida may ask questions that Izuku doesn’t know how to answer.

But he couldn’t do nothing. He can’t do nothing.

Even if all he can do for now is hug his friend as tight as he can, as tears gather and ready themselves to fall, and stare over Iida’s shoulder to meet Iida Tensei’s blank white eyes.

Chapter End Notes

CW: Non-canonical character death (Iida Tensei)

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You can see me. Right?”

Izuku nods—barely. Class won’t start for another fifteen minutes are so, and the room is still only half full. Iida is nearly a perfect image of poise right now, sitting straight-backed at his desk like he always is, as if there aren’t barely-noticeable wet spots on Izuku’s school blazer right now.

Iida Tensei is no longer hovering over his brother’s shoulder, because he’s moved to hover over Izuku’s instead. He looks pretty normal, as ghosts go, and Izuku’s privately glad of that. He doesn’t really want to know what a murder victim of Stain’s might look like.

“I don’t understand,” Tensei says. “You’re—you’re Midoriya, right? Tenya’s told me about you. He said your quirk was strength, and…”

Izuku takes out his notebook and a pencil. *It’s complicated,* he writes. *Seeing ghosts is the power I was born with. The strength came later.*

The air around him drops a little in temperature when Iida’s brother leans in to read over his shoulder. “Oh,” he says, and sounds confused.

Izuku keeps writing. *I’m sorry that this happened to you.*

“It’s… It’s my own fault,” Tensei says softly. “I shouldn’t have been alone. Especially against an enemy with a reputation like that. But I wasn’t thinking straight. I wasn’t thinking at all. And now…” Izuku looks up to see Tensei looking across the room to where Iida sits.

Gently he nudges Tensei for attention and writes another note. *Is there anything I can do to help?*

“H-huh?”

If there’s anything you want to say to him, I can try to pass the message along.

“Pass the—does he know?” Tensei asks. “About what you can do?”

Izuku shakes his head. *I can find a way. I always do.*

The ghost of Ingenium is quiet for a moment. “I… thank you. For offering. And thank you for—when Tenya walked in—well. It means a lot to me. And I’ll think about it, but for now… not yet.” His hands wring at his sides. He looks fuzzy around the edges; he’s not unstable, but that doesn’t mean he isn’t still upset.

Offer’s always open, Izuku writes. He looks again, pursing his lips, and takes in Tensei’s quiet misery. He’s watching Iida again, but not yet moving back to him—swaying forward, but not quite taking the steps. Izuku has seen pictures of Ingenium, videos of his heroics and the like, and he never imagined him looking so hopelessly lost.

Mindful of how close Bakugou is in front of him, he barely moves his mouth as he says under his breath, “Do you want to talk? If you do, I’ll listen.”

Tensei moves closer, either to catch Izuku’s words or because the offer tempts him. He wavers. “I don’t want to burden you with it. It… it isn’t nice, what happened to me.”

“Try me,” Izuku murmurs back. “You wouldn’t be the first. I can handle—”

Bakugou whirls around in his seat, spitting with rage. “For fuck’s sake, Deku, stop goddamn muttering!” he snaps. Izuku shuts his mouth and shrugs at Tensei.

The ghost is quiet for a moment. Izuku waits patiently.

“There isn’t even that much to tell,” Tensei bursts out in a sudden rush, like it’s something he’s been dying (ha, ha) to get off his chest. “It wasn’t—it wasn’t what I thought it would be. I mean—*fuck*.” Izuku blinks, vaguely surprised to hear language like that from his straitlaced friend’s older brother. “You get these visions in your head, you know? When you’re a pro, or—God, you don’t even have to be a pro, I bet you get little fantasies like that, too. Putting your life on the line for others. Dying like a martyr in the line of duty. Going down fighting. Bravery and sacrifice and glory, and—” He stops short, and one glance tells Izuku that it’s because he’s trying not to cry. “But it’s not like that. He just—I—I *shouldn’t have been there*. I shouldn’t have taken him on alone, because he—I couldn’t even tell what he did. I couldn’t *move*. Haha. Ha.” A bitter little laugh tumbles out of his mouth. “Me, the hero that relies on speed. *I couldn’t move*. No one knew that I was there. He could take his time. He could talk, and

gloat, and watch me squirm. And then… I don't know if he ran out of things to say, or he got bored, or…" The ghost's voice trails off. "I didn't die right away. I was still sort of… there… when he left. And when he was gone, I thought maybe I'd get lucky. Maybe someone would find me. Maybe I could get out of it alive, and see my brother again."

Izuku hears his next words as loud and clear as if Tensei were whispering them in an empty room.

"*But nobody came*."

The empty desk next to him scrapes out of the way, and suddenly Kirishima's there. In a moment of mild panic, Izuku slaps his notebook shut.

"Midoriya! Heya, I didn't get to talk to you after the Festival, and I just wanted to tell you*whoooaaaa*." Izuku looks up at him, and finds Kirishima inches away from his face, staring goggle-eyed at him. "Dude! Your face looks rad!"

Izuku's mind is a noisy mess. "Um."

"I'm serious!" Kirishima's sharp teeth show in a wide grin. "I'm not making fun of you, I promise, I really think you're scar looks awesome! It's, like, the halfway point between me and Todoroki!" His eyes widen further, which shouldn't even be possible. "Dude. That's from Todoroki's ice punch, isn't it?"

"W-well, uh…"

Todoroki picks that moment to slip in and take his seat, and Kirishima sees Izuku's line of vision move. He looks over his shoulder and gives a cheery grin and wave. Todoroki's nose, Izuku notices, is still visibly crooked.

Luckily, class starts soon after, forcing Izuku into something resembling a better headspace once he has other things to focus on. Aizawa's bandages are off, but that just means everyone can see the scarring on his face. If even Recovery Girl couldn't fix that, then that probably means those marks are going to stick with him for good.

(When Aizawa passes by Iida's desk on the way in, does he surreptitiously rest his hand on Iida's shoulder, just for a moment? It's too quick to catch.)

Izuku can't help it; his mouth drops open when Aizawa puts the draft nomination numbers up on the board. Bakugou and Todoroki have far and away the most, both of them numbering in the *thousands*. Uraraka and Iida are both up there, too, and even Sero managed to grab a few nominations for himself.

And as for Izuku…

He spots his name at the bottom. He's tied with Sero.

Beside him, Rei pats his shoulder excitedly and dances in place, and in spite of himself, he sits a little taller. Uraraka twists around in her seat to grin at him, and he smiles back.

Midnight-sensei joins the class shortly after that, to help with the other focus for today:

Hero names.

The class descends into a brainstorming session, and Izuku is hard-pressed not to knock his head repeatedly against his desk. He's dreamed of this for years. He's imagined having his own hero code name practically since he first learned to *talk*. But whenever he tried to brainstorm before… all he ever came up with were variations on All-Might.

Of course he did. He was a kid, and All-Might was who he wanted to be like. But now…

It just feels too childish. Too embarrassing. If he can't measure up to All-Might yet, then it'd be way too presumptuous to name himself after him.

Not to mention a little on-the-nose—his connection to All-Might is supposed to be a *secret*, after all.

Mind blank, Izuku looks around at his classmates. Everyone's murmuring together, laughing at each other's attempts, bouncing ideas off each other… It seems like everyone has more ideas, and better ideas, than he does.

The only ones who are being remotely quiet about it are Todoroki, and Iida. Todoroki's always quiet, and Iida…

"I didn't get to tell him."

Tensei's back.

Izuku looks up at him and tilts his head, asking his question silently.

"I didn't—I didn't get to tell him…" Tensei's pale hands curl into fists. "There is something, Midoriya. I don't know if you can find a way to tell him, in a way that… that won't hurt him. So you don't have to tell him yet. But…" The devastation on his face is raw. "I realized something, right at the last minute. I-I mean, when I—when Stain was —" He stops short, shutting his eyes tight for a moment. "There was a moment when I realized, 'This is it. This is where I die. The last thing I ever said to Tenya really is *the last thing*.'" Tears leak out from between his eyelids. "And I realized there was one more thing I wanted to tell him. So if you can—if you ever find a way to tell him the truth about what you can do…" The dead hero's blank eyes turn to him, desperate and pleading. "Tell him I want him to have my name. Tell him I want Ingenium to live on through him."

Izuku's heart lurches, and he gives the smallest nod he can manage. "I'll try," he whispers.

"Deku!" Uraraka hops into his space, hands braced on his desk with the pinkies raised to keep from activating her quirk. "Any ideas? I think I've got mine."

"I'm coming up empty," Izuku admits. His voice cracks on the way out, and he coughs a little.

"You okay?" Uraraka cocks her head to the side, almost birdlike. "Is something going on with you and Iida? You both have been sort of weird today."

"I can't say," Izuku says, which is a wonderful phrase because of how ambiguous and misleading it is. "This name thing is sort of taking all my thoughts right now."

"I'm kind of surprised. You're the biggest hero fanboy I know—did you really never imagine what your name might be if you ever became one?"

"Well, yeah." Izuku pulls a wry face. "Doesn't mean any of them were *usable*."

Uraraka giggles. "Oh c'mon, I bet you can't think of anything worse than Bakugou," she says, as if he isn't sitting in the desk right in front of them.

Bakugou hears it and twists around in his own seat, face thunderous. “Deku, I swear to fuck,” he snarls. “One word, and I’ll make your right eye match your left.”

And—

As Rei responds with a challenging hiss, Izuku blinks at him, shocked. It’s not that he isn’t used to Bakugou’s threats and insults. But he’s also used to the feelings that come with them. He’s used to the spike in fear, and the sickening dread that fouls his stomach. He’s used to feeling small whenever he hears his old nickname in Bakugou’s voice.

And… he doesn’t, this time.

Bakugou’s tone and temper make him tense, but the word *Deku* falls effortlessly on his ears and skims off of him harmlessly. When did that start happening?

Maybe, he thinks, *it started when ‘Deku’ stopped meaning ‘useless’ and started meaning ‘I can do it.’*

“Deku?” Uraraka ducks into his line of vision. “You sort of spaced out there, are you okay?”

“Yeah,” he blurts out. “I’m… *yeah*, I’m okay.”

It’s no small thing, reclaiming a name that has been used to grind him under someone’s heel since he was small. But he does it, and the look on Bakugou’s face is priceless.

(Iida doesn’t take a hero name. Izuku wrestles with the message locked behind his tongue, and feels Tensei’s eyes bore into him from across the room.)

Izuku knows it’s coming when Iida doesn’t join him and Uraraka for lunch. He feels the dread gathering like syrupy storm clouds in his stomach, and he knows Uraraka suspects something. She’s too smart to have missed the way he dodged her question earlier, and she sees through his carefully noncommittal noises when she wonders aloud where Iida’s gone.

It happens when lunch is maybe half over. Izuku feels jittery, enough to burn off excess nervous energy by browsing his phone. He hits the news app, refreshes it a few time, and there it is.

Iida Tensei, the hero Ingenium, was found dead on Saturday. The Hero Killer made no attempt to hide his involvement; Stain was behind this, and he wanted everyone to know about it.

Of course, this is not news to Izuku. He's been talking to Tensei's ghost out of the corner of his mouth all morning.

He imagines, for a moment, that the buzz of the cafeteria hall gets a little quiet. Not all at once, just in fits and spurts, sections at a time as people check their own news feeds and share with the people around them. He imagines eyes on them, people looking instinctively to their table, where Ingenium's younger brother always sits. He has no idea if that's really happening or not, and there's no real way to tell.

Beside him, he hears Uraraka's soft gasp.

"*Oh no*." The quiet horror in her voice wrenches his head back into the space it was in when Tensei was telling him how he died. Izuku puts down his chopsticks. Suddenly, the thought of food makes his stomach roil. "Oh, *Iida*…"

Izuku is out of his seat in a flash, barely registering Uraraka's voice. "Deku? Deku, wait a minute—"

"Bathroom," he says, and walks out of the cafeteria before he can say or do something embarrassing. Or worse, incriminating.

He walks, turning corners at random until he finds an empty section of the hallway where he can lean against the wall and slide down to the floor. Dimly he's aware of Rei hovering nearby, not close enough to crowd him, but close enough that he knows she's there. He puts his head between his knees and breathes.

He's always known that a hero's life is dangerous. He never knew the hero Ingenium before he showed up as a ghost.

But—

This is the first time that the danger has fully struck him. The USJ came close, because he nearly died and Aizawa nearly died, but they still got out of it.

And

This is the first time he's ever seen a ghost with a face he recognized.

And it isn't fear building and churning in his chest, because the fear's always been there and it's more like an annoying roommate than a weakness, but the roiling pressure won't go away. It's not fear, but it's a lot of things, sadness and anger and so many other things that he can't put a name to.

"Kiddo?"

He jolts, but he knows the voice. Ms. Shimura stands over him, and then she crouches by him, not keeping her distance quite as well as Rei does.

"Hey. Kiddo, *hey*." Cool hands press the sides of his head, and Izuku half-chokes on a sob and hopes that no one living walks by and sees him. "Toshi's on his way, I think. Just hang tight, okay?"

And that's fine, he thinks. He's not sure what he'd do if one of his classmates showed up, or some stranger who doesn't know him. But if it's just All-Might… then that's okay.

Hastily he struggles to his feet and wipes his eyes on instinct, even though they technically aren't wet yet. True to Ms. Shimura's word, he hears his mentor's distinctive heavy footsteps, and All-Might steps around the corner in his hero form. He isn't smiling.

"I was hoping for a word, my boy," he says. His voice is oddly gentle, and that sounds strange when it comes from him in this form. "Just a quick one. I'm sure you saw the news."

Izuku nods shakily.

"I saw you hurrying out of the cafeteria just now," All-Might says. "I thought that might have been what spooked you."

"I'm not," Izuku rasps out. His throat feels like sandpaper. "I'm not—I'm not scared. I-I mean, I am, but…" He sucks in a breath. "That's not… that's not why…"

All-Might is quiet for a moment, and Izuku privately wonders how much time he has in this form. "Do you want to talk about it? I'm not sure how much help I can be, but—"

"*I'm mad*." It comes out as a hiss, spat out through his teeth even as he feels tears well up in his eyes. "Or I'm sad. I'm both and I don't know what to do with it." He shoves his hands in his pockets, because he can't get the damn things to stop *shaking*.

“That’s understandable, my boy.” All-Might rests a hand lightly on his shoulder. In the back of his mind, Izuku wonders at how gentle a hand that size can be. “And believe you me, the Hero Killer *will* be stopped —”

“It shouldn’t have happened,” Izuku blurted. He’s not sure why the words are spilling out; it’s not like he has anything to prove. It’s not like All-Might is likely to disagree. “It shouldn’t have—everyone says he preaches about *phony heroes*—” The words taste foul as he spits them out. “And nobody deserves that but this was *Ingenium*, and he was *good* and—” The tears that come out feel so hot with anger that they nearly scald on their way down his face. He thinks of Tensei telling him *but nobody came*. “And I’m mad because he was Iida’s brother and Iida loved him and Stain left him in an alley like he was trash.”

The hand on his shoulder moves to his head, ruffling his hair gently as if he’s a little kid, and in spite of himself, Izuku leans into the touch.

“You’re right to be angry,” All-Might tells him.

Izuku wipes his face on his sleeve. “Sorry I’m crying again.”

“I think the situation calls for it, don’t you?” All-Might says gently. “Because like you said—you’re angry, and you’re sad, and you have every right to be.”

“I’m worried about Iida,” Izuku sniffles. “And I feel really useless, and that just makes the worrying worse.”

“You aren’t useless,” All-Might informs him. “But if you feel that way, and you are worried for your friend, then why not put the two together? Be there for your classmate. Ask him what he needs. Make sure he knows that he is not alone.” He lifts his hand away. “I’ll do what I can, of course, as his teacher. But at times like these, young Iida needs his friends.”

Izuku nods. “Okay.”

All-Might’s phone chimes in his pocket, and he startles a little. “Ah—I’d better get back to the lounge. Will you be all right from here, my boy?”

“I’ll be fine,” Izuku says. “Thanks, All-Might.”

“Anytime, my boy.” His steps are hurried as he leaves.

Ms. Shimura lingers a while longer. “I can’t speak for your friend,” she says. “No one can, really. I think your best bet is to ask, always. Don’t push.”

“I know,” Izuku says, wiping his eyes again. “I just—I wish I could do more.”

“You’re just like Toshi,” Ms. Shimura sighs. “Sometimes I stop to wonder why he picked you, but I never wonder very long. You’re like peas in a pod.”

Izuku laughs softly. “Hey, Ms. Shimura?”

She pauses, looking like she’s about to move off. “Yeah, beansprout? What is it?”

“Are you ever going to tell me who you are?”

Rei moves in the corner of his vision, catching his attention for a split second. When he looks back, Ms. Shimura is gone.

A stroke of luck comes his way by the end of the school day, in the form of a ghost. More specifically, this ghost is not a pro hero, or anyone recognizable. He’s an elderly man, clutching at Izuku’s arm with cold, wrinkled hands and a frantic plea. Izuku listens, and finds both a problem and, possibly, a solution.

If one more well-wisher comes up to him with condolences, Tenya is going to scream.

The story broke during lunch, and it feels as if half the school has trooped by him over the course of the day, with I’m-sorry’s and My-thoughts-are-with-you’s and more platitudes that do little more than burn in Tenya’s ears. He doesn’t want to walk around and absorb strangers’ sympathies like a passive waste of space; he wants to go out and *do* something, but there’s nothing he *can* do. He’s not a hero, and he can’t track down Stain by himself, which is what the dark, ugly part of his heart desperately wants. Even his family has been treating him with kid gloves, taking away every possible burden he could take on, and that’s kind of them but it leaves him nothing to do.

Even Yaoyorozu has offered to shoulder more responsibilities as assistant class rep, and Tenya had to argue with her just to get her to let him continue as normal.

If anyone comes up to him to take away more things for him to do, then he's only going to feel more helpless. And he's been drowning in helplessness since Saturday.

"Iida?"

"What." It comes out much, much harsher than he intended, because it's the end of the day and he's almost free to go home and do *absolutely nothing*. Mortified, he turns to find Midoriya looking at him with his newly scarred face, and wishes for a moment that he had a quirk that would let him sink into the floor. "I-I—Midoriya, forgive me—"

"Are you free today?" Midoriya asks, without preamble. "I could use your help with something, if you have time after school."

Tenya gapes at him.

"It's fine if you don't," Midoriya adds. "I was just wondering—"

"I do," Tenya says quickly. "I mean—I would be happy to assist you, Midoriya. And I'm grateful—er. I'm glad you trust me enough to ask." Was that an odd way to phrase it?

"Oh, good. So you're sure you're not busy?"

Tenya thinks for a moment of his mother, shooing away his offers to help shoulder the fallout of Tensei's death, and encouraging him to 'take time to himself.' "Not particularly."

Midoriya grins. "That's good. It's just—someone asked me for a favor and it's gonna take me to another part of town, and I could use your help if that's okay with you."

For one wild moment, Tenya strongly considers hugging his friend, or maybe asking if he doesn't have an extra quirk that lets him read minds and somehow know exactly what to say. He decides against both. "I would love to."

And so, Tenya finds himself tagging after Midoriya once the final bell rings. They take the train together, and Midoriya gives him an apologetic look beforehand; Tenya doesn't understand why until he realizes they're stuck in a crowded train car full of people liable to recognize him. Tenya keeps his head down, and Midoriya holds him in conversation to discourage anyone from rudely interrupting.

Midoriya is… cautious. Unsure of himself. Hesitant, even. But it manifests as a sort of general awkwardness, rather than handling Tenya with kid gloves.

“A department store?” Tenya says when they walk up to their first stop.

“Yeah,” Midoriya says. “There’s a pet supply store up top, and I need to pick up a couple things.”

“For your cat, I presume?”

“No, for, uh… this thing we’re doing,” Midoriya says as they enter the building. “Basically, uh, someone abandoned a dog and now it’s under someone’s house and won’t leave, so… yeah. We’re gonna get it out and take it to a shelter, if that’s cool with you.”

Tenya blinks at him, surprised. “I didn’t know you did animal rescue.”

“I-I don’t, I mean… not regularly,” Midoriya says cautiously. “But, well… I’ve done stuff like this a couple of times, and word gets around, and… yeah.” He shrugs.

“I see,” Tenya says, pausing at the elevator. “Top floor, you said?”

“Yeah. Um, I’m gonna take the stairs.” Midoriya points to the door by the elevators. “If you wanna come too, or if you just wanna meet me up there, that’s fine.”

“Oh,” Tenya says, faintly surprised. “All the way to the top?”

“Can’t skip leg day,” Midoriya says simply.

Was that a dig at Tenya’s quirk? If it is, then it’s the first time anyone’s tried joking with him since this afternoon. It actually kind of makes him want to laugh. “I’m right behind you,” he says, and follows Midoriya into the stairwell.

“Also,” Midoriya says, when they’re about halfway up. “Elevators are awkward. I figured… maybe you wouldn’t want to get stuck in one with people who might know your face.”

For a moment, Tenya stares at him, touched. “I… thank you, Midoriya,” he says. “That’s very thoughtful of you.”

“Well I’m a thoughtful person. That’s what I’m good at, thinking. Sometimes way too much, and out loud.”

Tenya manages a short, quiet little laugh at that. It's the most he's done since Saturday.

Midoriya purchases a small bag of dog treats and the cheapest leash, and another short train ride takes them to a residential neighborhood. They make conversation along the way—from casual, meaningless small talk to discussions of class topics. Midoriya is strangely easy to talk to, mostly because he does so much talking himself that Tenya's tired brain doesn't have to work much to participate. It's restful, almost. That Midoriya gives the subject of Tensei and Stain a wide berth is an extra courtesy.

He has to wonder, a few times, if Midoriya isn't distracted by something. He keeps getting these odd looks, as if he's thinking about something else. Or he'll seem to look at something over Tenya's shoulder, but when Tenya tries to follow his gaze, he doesn't see anything.

Ah, well. It's not as if this is anything new. Midoriya has always been an odd one.

"Midoriya," Tenya says at one point, when his friend pauses. "May I ask you something?"

"Sure."

Tenya braces himself. "How did you know?"

Midoriya looks at him blankly. "Know what?"

"This morning," Tenya continues. "The news story hadn't broke yet. It didn't until lunch. So this morning, when I walked in and you saw me… how did you know?"

It takes Midoriya a while to answer. Tenya's starting to wonder if he'll answer at all when Midoriya gives a little shrug. "Something about the look on your face."

"I thought I was being so careful," Tenya says. "It fooled everyone else all day."

"I have good instincts."

There's a note in Midoriya's voice that sounds… off, somehow. Tenya knows damned well how to tell when he's being brushed off. "Midoriya…"

“You just looked like you needed a hug,” Midoriya says. “I wasn’t gonna press you for details.”

Except, that sounds wrong. That sounds too uncertain to match up with the look that Tenya remembers seeing on Midoriya’s face—that cold, dawning horror. Midoriya talks as if it was a vague feeling with no context, no details, nothing concrete. But that dismay in his eyes had been a little too sharp for that to make sense.

“Midoriya, I consider you a good friend,” Tenya says carefully. “I trust you a great deal, and I don’t want to accuse you of anything. If you’re not comfortable talking about it, then that’s fine. But… that sounds like a lie.”

He expects Midoriya to brush it off, or backpedal, or get defensive about it. But instead Midoriya hums softly to himself, a thoughtful little sound, and stares forward into the middle distance.

“Don’t take it personally,” he says. “I lie to everyone.”

Izuku finds the house that the elderly ghost had directed him to, and knocks politely at the door. A woman answers promptly. “Hello!” he says. “I, uh, called earlier? I heard about the dog, so…”

She looks relieved. “Oh, right. Well, you’re welcome to try and get it out—here, it’s in the side yard, let me show you…”

The woman leads them to the side of the house, where there’s a small gap that can just barely fit a person through, leading into the dark space beneath the house. “It’s down there,” she says, stooping a little, but it’s hard to see beyond the first few feet. “We just bought the house and moved in a couple of weeks ago. I think the previous owner died and his dog must have gotten out.”

She isn’t wrong, Izuku knows. The previous owner did die; he’s the one who asked Izuku to come. What this lady doesn’t know is that his family sold the house and left without bothering to rehome his dog.

“How very irresponsible,” Iida remarks. The woman looks at him, surprised, and Izuku sees recognition flicker in her eyes.

“Um, aren’t you—” she begins.

“Is it okay if we take a while with this?” Izuku asks. “It might take a few hours to convince her to come out.”

“Oh, well, that’s all right,” she says, apparently unperturbed by his interruption. “As long as you can take care of the poor thing. I’d take it myself, but my husband’s allergic, and neither of us have the time anyway.”

“Okay, well, thank you.” Izuku gives her a polite smile.

“Oh no, thank *you*,” she says.

She leaves them to it, and Izuku seats himself by the gap that leads to the crawl space beneath the house. It’s dark and cramped further in, but Izuku holds out his phone to illuminate it. Toward the back of the space, he sees the light reflect off a pair of eyes.

“Ah, I saw it!” Iida crouches by him. “Do you think one of us can fit under there?”

“Might not be a good idea,” Izuku says. “It’s pretty small and cramped, and if we crowd her she might panic.”

“Good point. What would you suggest, then?”

Izuku shrugs. “Talk quietly, throw in some treats every now and then, and see if she gets used to us being here. Might take a while.”

“That’s fine.” Iida shifts to sit more comfortably in the dirt beside him. “My mother hasn’t been letting me help much with…” His voice trails off.

“He finds things to do when he’s upset,” Tensei explains. He’s off to the side, where Rei is teaching him clapping games. “It’s how he copes. If he can’t keep busy in a crisis, he stresses himself to death.”

Izuku nods. “Well, thanks for coming,” he says. “Stuff like this… it gets pretty boring sometimes.”

“It’s no trouble at all,” Iida says. He takes a treat out of the bag, aims carefully, and tosses it toward the back of the space. Silence follows, and then rustling and crunching.

“Well, that’s a start,” Izuku says.

Sure enough, they’re there for a while, sitting and talking, plying the dog under the house with a treat every now and then. Izuku’s eyes start to adjust to the dark, and he watches as the mound of fur gradually moves closer.

It's a quiet day. Izuku could be doing other things, like training, or focusing on his hero studies. They both could. But there's plenty of time for that tomorrow. And besides—there's a dog that needs help, and an elderly ghost worrying about the poor thing, and that's reason enough to stick around.

The dog is a little over halfway to the opening when Izuku's phone vibrates in his pocket. He wrestles it out and checks his latest text message.

[4:42] Todoroki:
I'm free today, in case you're still interested in what we were talking about earlier.

Izuku winces a little. Todoroki had said Mondays and Wednesdays were good for him, and it *had* been Izuku's idea. But he can hardly leave Iida now, when they're wrist-deep in dirt and making very slow progress that still counts as progress. The last thing he wants to do is give up. If he gives up, it will just be one more heavy thing following him around until he takes care of it.

Besides, after today… he's not sure he's in the right state of mind to be throwing punches at people.

[4:43] Izuku:
i'm kinda in the middle of something rn
i'm sorry! It just kinda came up
i'm close by 2-3-1 kiyashi if you wanna hang out tho

He means it as a joke, and is therefore very surprised when Todoroki actually shows up.

Shouto isn't sure what he expects, but this definitely isn't it. The neighborhood is a nice one, very quiet and respectable-looking, and also nowhere near where Midoriya or Iida actually live. So that's why he's a little confused to find his classmates here on a school day.

It takes a moment or two of searching to find them, but he eventually catches sight of Midoriya's distinctive hair on the other side of a low fence. He's not alone, either; Shouto's spent enough time in class to know what the back of Iida's head looks like. He walks over, and—it's something of a point of pride for him, that he's trained himself to move noiselessly when he wants to. It's useful for avoiding his father's attention, and for avoiding attention in general. But Midoriya looks up and meets his eyes well before Shouto even reaches the fence.

"What are you doing?" Shouto asks.

Midoriya stares at him owlishly from where he and Iida are sitting in a patch of dirt in front of a dark hole leading under the house. "I didn't think you'd actually show up," he blurts.

Todoroki blinks at him, stuffing the sudden feeling of embarrassment deep, deep down inside. Midoriya must have meant the invitation as a joke, and he'd taken it literally. "Should I leave?"

"Nah," Midoriya says. His voice is strangely quiet. "Unless you want to."

"Just try to keep quiet," Iida adds, and it's odd to hear him talk so softly. "You might scare her." He reaches into the bag sitting between him and Midoriya, and tosses something under the house. Shouto's sharp ears pick up the sound of rustling from somewhere in the darkness. Curiosity overtakes him, and he carefully hops the fence and goes to sit down on Midoriya's other side.

"So what exactly—?"

"There's a dog," Midoriya says, gesturing vaguely to the space under the house.

"She was just *left* here." There's a note of disgust in Iida's voice. "Who would do that, to a dog?" He shakes his head. "She's apparently been here a couple weeks. The homeowners have been feeding her, but she's scared."

"We've been trying to get her to trust us," Midoriya says. "She's a lot closer than she was two hours ago."

Shouto cranes his neck, and catches sight of what looks like a dirty pile of fur, just barely visible in the dark, about three feet in. "Why not go in after it?"

“It might startle the dog,” Iida says. “She’s not very big, but she can still bite.”

“Oh.” Shouto hesitates, and eyes the bag of dog treats. “Can I try?”

They sit there for another twenty minutes before the dog finally wanders within reach. It’s Iida who reaches in first, muttering “Good dog, please don’t bite me, please don’t bite me,” before gently brushing his fingers along the dog’s muzzle. It pulls away at first, but another treat calms it, and it lets Iida touch it again.

Finally, it crawls out of the darkness and approaches them, tail between its legs. It’s a fluffy little white spitz, or at least it was at one point. It’s now a mess of matted, dirty, probably flea-infested fur, and when Midoriya gingerly coaxes its head through a looped leash, it shivers. It’s another ten minutes before it finally relaxes enough to lie down and eat another treat.

“I know a rescue that can take her,” Midoriya says. “They’ll take care of her, clean her up and have a vet look at her and stuff.”

“How often do you do this?” Shouto asks.

“Do what? This specifically, or…?”

Iida gives him a quizzical look. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, sometimes,” Midoriya says. “It’s not always this, but it is sometimes. It’s just… favors, I guess.”

“To anyone in particular?” Iida asks.

“Not really. Just anyone who asks. Sometimes animals are involved. More often than I’d like.”

Shouto blinks at him, mildly baffled.

They take the dog out of the yard and out to the sidewalk.. “Well, I was happy to help,” Iida says. “Even though—to be honest, Midoriya, I’m not sure you really needed me. If you’ve done this before, then you probably had this well in hand.”

“Oh, I did,” Midoriya replies.

“Then why—?”

“Sometimes everything’s awful,” Midoriya says, as the smudged white

dog trembles at his feet. He stoops to offer another treat, and the dog takes it gently from his hand. “Or it feels like it, anyway. And you think, what’s the point of everything if it’s just going to come back around to awful again?” He runs his fingers lightly over the dog’s ear. “And when that happens—when I feel like that, I just find something… useful to do. Something that helps someone, and doesn’t have anything to do with what upset me. Doesn’t matter who, doesn’t matter why. If I can do it, then anyone can do it, and anyone *will* do it.” He shrugs. “I dunno. I guess it just reminds me that if I can do things that matter to someone, then maybe everything doesn’t have to be hopeless bullshit.” Iida blinks in surprise, but Shouto has already heard Midoriya curse before.

“It still feels like it,” Iida says quietly.

“I know,” Midoriya says. “I don’t know if that goes away.”

“It doesn’t,” Shouto says bluntly. He knows it doesn’t, because he’s still waiting.

“I was just trying to help,” Midoriya says. “It helps me to be helpful, sometimes. I don’t know if you’re the same, but I thought it was worth a try.”

“I… to be honest, I’m not sure if it worked, either,” Iida admits. “But… thank you, Midoriya. For trying.”

“You’re welcome.” Midoriya stands up and dusts himself off, or tries to. “It’s just—you can’t fix everything, but just because things are awful doesn’t mean you can’t do something about them.”

For a moment, there’s a steely glint in Iida’s eyes, but it’s gone in the next. “I suppose you’re right,” he says. He checks his phone. “Ah—I should head home. My parents will be worrying.”

“Alright,” Midoriya says. “See you tomorrow, Iida.”

Shouto watches his classmate go, only to glance over at Midoriya when the latter starts bouncing a little on the balls of his feet.

“I’m worried about him,” Midoriya says. “I hope he talks to someone. Doesn’t have to be me, just someone.”

“Do you always drag people’s problems out into the open?” Shouto asks, because he never did get a straight answer when he tried asking Bakugou.

“I’m nosy, sneaky, and I can’t mind my own business,” Midoriya replies.

“That’s probably why you got three votes in the class election,” Shouto tells him. Midoriya blinks and stares at him for a moment, and Shouto shrugs. He’s glad he voted for Yaoyorozu, but if he had known what kind of person Midoriya was at the time, it might have at least taken him longer to decide. “After you deal with the dog, would you be up for a spar?”

Midoriya takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. “You know what? Yes. Yes I am.”

You can learn a lot about a person just from their fighting style.

For example, he learns that day that when Midoriya calls himself sneaky, he means it.

Chapter End Notes

CW: grief.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

> More art! Hukkini on Tumblr drew my favorite line to write as an amazing comic!
>
> Edit 12/26/17: By popular demand and my own personal desire, I have made a minor aesthetic modification to Izuku in this story; this chapter has been edited to include it.

Lunch with Uraraka and Iida the next day is a quiet affair.

Usually they're animated, with Uraraka and Izuku competing to see who can dominate the conversation with chatter, interspersed with Iida's booming voice and vigorous gesturing. But now, their little group is a muted pocket in the midst of the cafeteria's general buzz of activity.

It's not an uncomfortable atmosphere, but it is a somber one. Uraraka's finally stopped looking like she desperately wants to say something but can't think of what. Iida, ironically, is doing most of the talking; the main reason why they aren't totally silent is that he's making calm small talk—safe, day-to-day topics like school work and class schedules and training.

Izuku, for his part, is just trying not to stare at Tensei too much while he worries about things. Rei's taken a liking to him, but Izuku can't bring himself to enjoy the sight of her scampering around at his heels or hanging off his shoulders like a monkey. There's far too much on his mind. He has a message to deliver and no idea how to do so. There's a hero killer on the loose. His friend is sad and it's going to take more than a pep talk and a dirty dog to make things better. He has a short list of hero agencies to choose from and only a few days to make his decision, and Ms. Shimura's promised "Gran Torino" is not on that list.

("Be patient," Ms. Shimura has told him. "You grabbed his attention. He's just taking a while because he's making it out to be more complicated than it is. He'll probably send his nomination in a little late.")

There's only a few days before the deadline for his decision, and Izuku isn't sure how long he can afford to wait.

Eventually, even Iida runs out of topics, and their table lapses into silence. It's only a brief one, but Izuku sees the way Iida's hands curl and uncurl in his lap.

"I do apologize," Iida says. "I've been out of sorts, and if I'm making things awkward—"

"Of course you're not!" Uraraka cuts him off. "And—Iida, even if you were, it's not your fault."

"Th-thank you, Uraraka, but… even still." Iida's knuckles are nearly white. "In spite of everything, I still have responsibilities, a-and obligations that I mustn't let fall to the wayside—"

"No one's expecting you to snap back to normal," Izuku says, with a quick glance at Tensei. "Iida… you lost someone important."

"Yeah," Uraraka says softly. "I don't have any siblings, so I don't know what that's like, but… you know it's okay to not be okay, right?" She tries a smile, and it comes out a little wobbly. "I-I mean, I know you have engines in your legs, but you're not a robot."

Iida manages a smile of his own at that. "I suppose not…" He leans his chin on his palm, and his eyes lose a bit of their focus. "It's just… there's this one thing, and it's—it's such a petty thing, but it bothers me. Just thinking about it makes me feel ill, but…"

"What is it?" Izuku asks cautiously. Tensei looks up from where Rei is eagerly showing him how to finger-spell.

"It feels like the end of an era," Iida replies. "And—I know he wasn't top ranked, he was no All-Might or Endeavor or Best Jeanist, but… it bothers me to see the sun rise and everyone go on with their lives, even though the hero Ingenium is gone. It's over."

Uraraka makes a quiet, sympathetic little noise. Izuku feels Tensei's eyes on him, and sees an opportunity to fulfill an obligation.

He hesitates for a moment. He knows he's treading on treacherous ground here; he knows that one verbal misstep will make him look foolish at best and horribly disrespectful at worst. So he hesitates, cudgeling his brain for the right words.

"W-well… maybe it doesn't have to be?" he says at last.

Iida looks up at him, and the fog in his eyes clears and sharpens.

“What?”

Izuku swallows the urge to backtrack, because he did make a promise and he’s not likely to have an opening like this again anytime soon. “I mean…” He takes a deep breath, shoots one last glance at Tensei, and takes the plunge. “You’re his little brother, aren’t you? And… you haven’t really picked a hero name.” He sees Iida’s face and bearing change, shifting from wary confusion to white-knuckled comprehension. His nerve nearly fails him then and there, but it’s too late to backpedal now. “I just think, if anyone has a right to carry that torch, it’s you.”

The pounding of his pulse in his ears is almost deafening. Iida gapes at him, rigid with shock, unaware of the way his older brother is watching him intently.

“I…”

“It’s just a thought,” Izuku says quietly, which isn’t quite the same as backpedaling. “I just… I think, if you don’t want that to die, then—then that part, at least, that one thing… you can still protect that.”

“I’m… not sure that’s true.” Iida’s nearly whispering, which is something Izuku has never heard him do before.

It’s what he’d want, Izuku wants to say, but he doesn’t. He has no right to say that, as far as Iida knows. And Izuku doubts that there will ever be a right time to tell Iida the truth, but it certainly wouldn’t be here and now. “Just think about it,” he murmurs, and says no more on the subject.

Iida gives him a curt nod, and nothing more.

True to Ms. Shimura’s prediction, Gran Torino’s nomination comes through at the very last minute. Izuku finds out when All-Might pulls him aside for a conversation on the subject, looking like someone just walked over his grave. Ms. Shimura, as close to his side as always, looks like she’s not sure whether to give him a hug or burst out laughing.

“Sorry, bean sprout, I didn’t think he’d take it quite like that,” she says, a little shamefaced. “But I guess, considering how things went, I shouldn’t really be that surprised.”

“His name is Gran Torino,” All-Might says, and there’s a strange

tension in the smile on his face. He walks further down the hall from the classroom, keeping his back to Izuku. “He’s taught at UA before, but only for one year. ...He was my homeroom teacher, in fact.”

“Wait. What?” Izuku blurts out, darting to catch up. “He taught at UA? He taught *you*?” He shoots a wide-eyed look at Ms. Shimura, who gives him an innocent smile in return. The word she had used was *friend*. He’d never thought—he’d never even *imagined*—

Well, it was hard to imagine. All-Might was the greatest. The strongest hero, with no one equal to him, much less anyone better. Logically he had to have started out as a student, but… still.

“He knows about One For All, as well,” All-Might continues. “That’s probably why he gave you that nomination.”

“Does he not usually, um, take on students?” Izuku asks, choosing his words carefully. Fishing for information from All-Might is not something he ever could have prepared himself for.

“N-no…” All-Might’s hands wring at his sides. “I was… a special case. I think he was doing it as a favor to… well, anyway. He retired many years ago, and I haven’t known him to be active otherwise.”

“When’s the last you heard from him?” Izuku presses.

All-Might’s steps go uneven for a moment, and he pauses. “I… can’t recall.”

“Did something—”

“Midoriya,” Ms. Shimura says sharply, and Izuku’s tongue locks in place.

“Um… n-never mind,” he murmurs.

All-Might, fortunately, barely seems to notice anything amiss. He’s still speaking, but it’s as if he’s talking to himself. “I wonder… did he nominate you because my teaching is inadequate?” There’s no denying it now; he’s *shaking*. “I have to admit, the thought of him taking up his name again and nominating you is… a little terrifying.” He holds up a folded piece of paper, and it crinkles in his shaking hand. “B-but in any case, while training you is my responsibility—well, you were nominated, so… i-it’s not as if any of the other agencies can show you how to use—well. Ahem. You should g-go. Learn what you can from him. H-he’s… you’ll do fine. I’m sure of it.”

Izuku takes the paper, feeling his breakfast creep back up his stomach. What kind of person is Gran Torino, if just hearing from him is enough to throw All-Might for a loop?

"Oh! And one more thing," All-Might says, grasping eagerly at a chance to change the subject. "Your costume! It just got back from being repaired. You can pick it up after school—you'll need it for next week's training."

Izuku's heart leaps. He'd missed having it when villains attacked the USJ; it would have been nice to be able to fight in it instead of his gym clothes. He'll just have to take better care of it this time. "Okay. Thanks, All-Might." He hesitates. "Any… any advice? For learning from Gran Torino?"

All-Might's hand falls heavily on his shoulder. Izuku can feel it still shaking. Without a word, All-Might squeezes his shoulder, pats it lightly, and walks off.

"Okay then." Taking advantage of the fact that All-Might has his back to him, Izuku shoots one hand out and catches Ms. Shimura by the wrist, stopping her from following. Once All-Might is out of sight, and his footsteps have faded to silence, Izuku raises his eyes to Ms. Shimura's pale face.

"There are things he's not ready to talk about yet," Ms. Shimura tells him quietly.

"Ms. Shimura, did you stop me because he's not ready to talk yet, or because you're not ready for me to know?"

Her face tightens.

"I'm going to find out," Izuku tells her. "One way or another. You can't force me to put it off forever." He glares up at her, still gripping her wrist. "I may not know how you fit into all of this, but I'm in this up to my neck. I can't force you to tell me anything. I can't force *anyone* to tell me anything. But if all you're going to do is stonewall me whenever I need answers, that's not fair."

Ms. Shimura can't look him in the eye for long, and soon turns her head away. "…You're right. You're right, I'm sorry. That was… I wasn't thinking."

"What do you think is going to happen when I find out who you are?" Izuku presses. "Why are you so afraid of that?"

“Because you love him,” Ms. Shimura blurts out.

Izuku blinks.

“You love Toshi,” she says quietly. “You love him with all your heart, and I’m glad, Izuku, I’m—I’m *so happy* that he found you.” The smile that curls at her mouth is a bitter one; there’s not a drop of joy to be found in it. “And that’s why I know you won’t forgive me when you find out what I did to him.”

He blinks, and suddenly he’s alone in the hallway, holding on to nothing.

“I hate it when they do that,” he says to Rei. She heaves a sigh and shrugs.

He returns to the classroom without arousing anyone’s curiosity. If nothing else, the tension he’s felt over nominations is more or less resolved. Almost everyone has already made their choice, and is happy to discuss it when there’s a free moment in class. Uraraka’s choice focuses on hand-to-hand combat. Iida’s picking a more average agency to get a feel for the general work environment. Mineta picked Mount Lady, and Izuku isn’t sure whether to pray for Mount Lady’s sanity or Mineta’s physical safety.

Even Todoroki has come to a decision, which is frankly a miracle considering how many nominations he had to choose from.

“You’re picking Endeavor’s agency?” Izuku asks, not long before the lunch bell is about to ring. “You got more nominations than anyone. You could have your pick of any top agency in the city.”

Todoroki shrugs. “I can. So I’m picking the highest one.”

“Well, yeah, but…” Izuku’s voice trails off. His own newly updated nomination list is in his hand, less than half a page long, unlike the veritable ream of papers in front of Todoroki. “I dunno, I figured you’d have had your fill of learning from him.”

“Maybe I feel that way,” Todoroki says. “But regardless of how I might personally feel, he’s still the second-strongest hero, and the most prolific. He knows the industry forward and backward.” The volume of his voice drops. “He’s a bastard, but he still has his uses.”

“Mm.” The noise Izuku makes is noncommittal at best. Rei’s apparently feeling mischievous, because she casually blows at the list

on Todoroki's desk, sending the top two pages flying. Seeing the prank coming, Izuku snatches them back out of the air without looking and puts them down again. "Still, though."

"You don't have to worry about me," Todoroki says flatly. "What I learn this week will have nothing to do with my father or how I feel about him. I'm not so weak-minded that I can't focus on what needs to be done."

"Didn't mean to imply you were," Izuku says. "But… for the record, Todoroki?" He pauses, one finger on the stack to keep Rei from blowing it away again. "Avoiding things that hurt you doesn't count as weakness."

Todoroki raises an eyebrow at him. "Doesn't it?"

"Not if there's a choice. And, uh." Izuku looks at the list. "You do have loads of choices. But it's not really weakness. It's more just… taking care of yourself." He shrugs, feeling awkward. "I dunno. It's up to you. I just don't think you have to prove anything."

"I understand. And thank you—for your concern." Todoroki straightens the papers, his face set. "But honestly, I think this will take me where I need to go." He glances up. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

"Do you know who you're choosing?"

"Yeah." Izuku glances down at the page, eyeing the name at the very bottom of the list. "I had one recommended to me, so that's what I'm gonna go with."

It's high time he got some answers.

The week of on-the-job training arrives. The class splits up at the train station, everyone laden with cases containing their hero costumes. Aizawa sends them all off, and Izuku can already feel his nerves buzzing.

It's not just for himself, either. He doesn't like the look on Todoroki's face, or the way his classmate—*friend, Todoroki's his friend*—avoids talking to anyone. He knows full well that Todoroki skimmed details when they spoke at the Sports Festival, and he can't help but worry about Endeavor's idea of training. And Todoroki's not the only who's

quiet.

“Hey, Midoriya?” Izuku looks up to find Tensei standing by him. “Listen… I just wanted to say thanks. For being there for him. I’ve been worried about him lately, so…”

Izuku grins, and signs a quick “you’re welcome.” He’s seen Rei teaching him simple signs when she gets bored during school hours.

“I’m still worried,” Tensei says. “In the past couple of days… I don’t know, it’s like he’s got his energy back, but I don’t know if it’ll last. So just… thanks for looking out for him.”

Nodding, Izuku looks past him to where Iida is already walking away. Uraraka catches on, as well—silence is hard to miss when it’s coming from Iida.

“Hey, Iida?”

His friend pauses. Izuku hesitates, not quite sure what to say. Since their conversation at lunch, he hasn’t mentioned Stain or Tensei once—nor has the latter left his side. Izuku would like to think that this is because Iida is grieving privately, or gradually coming to terms with it, but he can’t be sure.

“You know you can talk to us, right?” he says at last, as Uraraka stands beside him and nods along. “If you need to. We’re your friends.”

“We’re here for you, Iida,” Uraraka adds.

Izuku doesn’t quite see what flits across Iida’s face in that moment; it passes too quickly for him to be sure whether or not he sees anything at all. But in the next moment, Iida’s smiling back.

“Sure,” he says. “Thank you, both of you.”

As Iida turns away, Izuku considers bringing up their conversation from earlier, and his suggestion on Tensei’s behalf, but he decides against it.

Watching Iida leave with his ghostly brother close by his side, he considers quite a few things that he doesn’t go through with.

(If only foresight were as clear as hindsight.)

The train ride gives Izuku forty-five minutes to stew alone in his

nerves as he watches the landscape go by. Well—not quite alone. Rei distracts him by signing things she sees out the window, or with silent impressions of the other passengers on the train. Izuku has to take his phone out and pretend to browse his texts to keep from looking like he's laughing at nothing.

From the train station, the address takes him to a building that looks less like a hero agency and more like a condemned apartment complex. The front door has a broken neon 'Welcome' sign hanging over it, almost mockingly. Izuku… isn't sure what he was expecting, but it sure as hell isn't this.

He comes to a halt and casts a dubious eye over the place. "Um…" He glances at Rei, who cocks her head this way and that as if the slight change in angle will reveal more information.

I'll check if it's safe, she signs to him, and vanishes from his side. Izuku counts in his head and makes it to ten before she reappears, and she looks no less confused than he feels.

"Well?" he asks.

There's a man in there, she tells him. *He's lying on the floor in a puddle of ketchup.*

"I-is he okay?"

He's completely fine, and he's awake. He's just lying there covered in ketchup.

Izuku wishes with all his heart that Ms. Shimura were here. Then maybe he could turn to her and ask Hey Maybe What The Hell? But she's not here, and this is probably all the information he's going to get (which is more information than this mysterious Gran Torino expects him to have) so there's really nothing for it. With a shrug at his friend, Izuku walks into the building.

With Rei's guidance, he finds the ketchup-covered man in question. As it turns out, "lying there covered in ketchup" is… a bit of an understatement.The floor is a mess of spilled food and shattered crockery. The trailing end of the string of sausage links that protrudes out from underneath the man has a passing resemblance to intestines. The whole scene might have made the little old man look eviscerated, if not for the fact that Izuku already knows what actual evisceration looks like.

And he really is a *little* old man. He's a lot shorter than Izuku expected, especially if he's the Gran Torino that All-Might quietly fears, and that Ms. Shimura has been talking up this whole time. In fact, he's not just short; he's *tiny*. Izuku has more than a head and a half on him—or at least he would, if he were standing up.

From this distance, if Izuku squints a bit, he can see the man breathing. "Um. Hello?" he starts. "Are you oka—"

The man's head shoots up, and he *screams*. "I'M ALIVE!"

Izuku startles badly enough to drop the case with his costume in it, right as Rei tries to leap into his arms. It doesn't quite work, and she ends up scrambling up onto his shoulders instead. It takes all of his self-control to stay still while she does that, while also fighting to get his heart rate back to a more reasonable level.

"Um," he says, as Gran Torino gets to his feet. "Is… is this hazing? Is that what's going on? Am I being hazed?"

"WHO'RE YOU?" Gran Torino asks, by shouting it in his face.

"Oh, I'm from U.A.," Izuku answers, relieved that maybe this is moving forward. "I'm Midoriya Izuku."

"WHAT?" Gran Torino shouts again.

"Midoriya Izuku!" Izuku repeats, enunciating as clearly as he can. Slowly, Rei starts climbing down off of him. "You nominated me, remember?"

"WHO'RE YOU?"

"I'm—"

Either he's talking too quietly or the man isn't paying attention, because Gran Torino cuts him off with, "You know, I'm starving. I wanna eat something!" and plops back down in the puddle of ketchup.

Two thoughts occur to him. The first is the recollection that All-Might has not seen this man in years, and a simple logical leap takes him to the fact that if All-Might hasn't seen him, then Ms. Shimura hasn't, either. The second is Oh God help him the man is senile. It's not as much of a shock as it could be; Ms. Shimura did imply that he was getting on in years, and if she hasn't seen him in a long time, then there's probably a lot that she doesn't know about him.

“W-well, okay,” Izuku says. Senile doesn’t mean wrong, nor does it mean useless; it just means he needs a little more creativity and patience than he would have predicted. “That’s fine, but I was actually hoping you could help me. Do you remember nominating me, at least?”

The old man looks him in the eye, frowning as if trying to recall a name. And then he does—recall a name, that is. It isn’t the correct one, but Izuku can’t find it in himself to complain because the name he says is “Toshinori.”

Izuku goes still and silent.

So this is the student that Nana’s little golden boy has taken a shine to. He ain’t much to look at, if Gran Torino is any judge. But then, neither was Toshinori when he first laid eyes on the brat. Of course, even Toshinori was taller than this one. This kid looks soft and doe-eyed, and a drunk monkey could tie a necktie better than that. But mostly he looks like he hasn’t had a proper sleep in at least a week.

On the other hand… there is something to him, something besides the scar on his face and the weird way that the light hits his eyes in the dimness. It’s the sort of something that he wouldn’t have expected Toshinori to pick up on, because it isn’t the same blinding-brightness that Toshinori himself practically *sweats*. No—this particular ankle-biter has something different.

Maybe it’s the fact that he barely blinked at Torino’s little prank, which could just mean he’s dense, or it could mean he’s too sharp to be fooled by a ketchup puddle and a few sausage links.

…Well. Either way, he can work with that.

The senile act has thrown this kid off balance already—not as much as he’d like, though, so he throws out Toshinori’s name, just to gauge his reaction.

He expects confusion, or at least for the kid to write it off as the ‘dementia’ talking. But instead the kid freezes, and his eyes lose that glazed look of patient confusion. He blinks, and for a split second he looks like he’s seen or heard a ghost.

“Toshi…nori?” the kid echoes, and steps forward with a sharp look in his eye like Gran Torino holds all the answers to his questions—which, let’s face it, he probably does. “Is that his name? Is that All-

Might's name?"

Gran Torino blinks, and the boy steps forward again.

"I have questions for you," he says. "Lots of them. And someone—well. I've been told you can help me. With my power?"

Now they're getting somewhere. He could still use a little more information on this kid, though—after decades of radio silence from Nana's brat, he figured asking Toshinori himself was probably a no-go. Torino watches the boy out of the corner of his eye, pretending to ignore him as he turns to the case that the kid dropped earlier. Casually he opens it, and finds a neatly folded green jumpsuit inside. This is his hero costume, from the looks of it. "One For All, huh," he cackles, and sees the boy's eyes light up almost literally. "I'd like to see how well you can handle it."
The eagerness dims then, and if Torino were any judge he'd say the kid was shrinking back a little. "Er, well…"

"You got a nice costume here," Torino continues, and he does, just judging by a cursory glance. Not too bad, for a Mark 1. "So why don't you put it on and come at me." Before the kid can answer, Torino barks out another "WHO ARE YOU?" because it is damn funny to see him jump.

"I can't control it yet," the kid answers, and there's an edge to his voice—ohoho, he's starting to try the brat's patience now. "That's why I came. I need to learn how to deal with these powers, because All-Might doesn't have much time left." His hands curl into fists—Torino can see scars on the right one. "Can you help me?"

Torino keeps quiet just long enough to let the boy squirm a little. Then he moves.

His quirk's just like riding a bike, really. He's not one to let excess fat grow on his bones, but he imagines that even if he went years without using his power, it would still come back to him like an old friend. In the blink of an eye, he ricochets off the ceiling, walls, and floor—so he's showing off a little, sue him—and ends up staring down into Midoriya Izuku's shocked eyes. There's a grin that Torino can't keep off his face, and he tosses the facade to the side because *they are in business*.

"Remains to be seen," he says, and commits the dumbstruck look on the kid's face to memory, just in case he ever needs a private chuckle. "Can't help ya if I've got nothing useful to work with. Think you're

big, kid? You're barely a twinkle in your mother's eye. Now—if you meant all those pretty words, then get over here and *come at me*."

The boy blinks, and his eyes flicker to the side. "A ruse," he says, like he's talking to himself. "What is it with teachers and logical ruses? Would it kill them to just say what they mean?"

So, he's not just a brat—he's a *mouthy* brat. In a heartbeat, Torino knocks him off his feet and makes it up to the opposite wall. "I said my bit already, boy," he says. "You wanna learn a thing or two, or are you all talk?"

When the boy's eyes meet his, they're shining with eagerness, lingering confusion, and just a little bit of relief. Those are busy eyes; he looks like he's not sure what to think, and that suits Torino just fine. Better to keep him guessing. Just for a moment, there's an almost knowing look in those eyes, like the brat's got some private joke that he's not about to share.

"I still have questions for you," he says.

"That's nice, boy," Torino replies. "Tell ya what. I'll give 'em a listen once you prove to me you're worth wastin' my breath on answers."

"Fair enough," the brat says, as his eyes search Torino's face as if he can find his answers written in the wrinkles. And then he smiles.

Gran Torino takes that smile and locks it away for later, for any future moments where he needs to remind himself that this wide-eyed, wet-behind-the-ears rookie isn't another Toshinori. 'Cause Nana's brat smiles a hell of a lot, but he ain't hardly ever smiled like that.

Toshinori's smile is mask and a symbol, an inseparable part of what makes All-Might, All-Might. He puts his smile on like it's part of his costume.

This kid brandishes it like a weapon.

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

> Pintura on Tumblr drew these lovely portrait in sepia and black and white of Izuku and Rei! Goo look, it's beautiful!
>
> Edit 12/26/17: By popular demand and my own personal desire, I have made a minor aesthetic modification to Izuku in this story; this chapter has been edited to include it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuku is becoming increasingly familiar with the taste of Gran Torino's hardwood floors, and he's not entirely sure how he feels about that.

He would have said mortified, because that was how it felt the first time a tiny old man sent him somersaulting straight into the floor, but it's happened often enough now that he's almost numb to it. He certainly doesn't have to wonder why All-Might was so scared of this guy anymore.

Every trick that Ms. Shimura has shown him thus far, every feint and maneuver that's gotten him through his previous fights, even the few tricks Todoroki has had the chance to show him, are next to useless against Gran Torino. He even tried a few cheap shots out of desperation, and… well. He's not in a hurry to make that mistake again.

At least Rei doesn't look so offended anymore whenever he hits the floor. She's far too busy laughing at him, the traitor.

"You're a scrappy little thing, that's for sure," Gran Torino remarks at one point, charitably giving Izuku a chance to catch his breath. "But scrappy won't get you far if you won't even use your damn quirk."

"It's not that simple," Izuku says, gritting his teeth in frustration. "If I use it, I either break myself or you or both of us, and—" He's flat on his face again before he can finish the thought.

Recovery Girl's warnings are fresh in his mind as he focuses his power. He concentrates, remembering how he'd brought it out against Todoroki in the cavalry battle. It hurts, but his arm stays unbroken, and for a moment it looks like he's finally going to land a proper hit.

Thud.

And there's the floor again. There's a lovely dent in the ceiling, though.

"Damn it, boy, if you were any more rigid, I'd paint you neon and use *you* for a Welcome sign!" Gran Torino tells him.

"Almost had it," Izuku mutters, trying to hide the fact that the wind has been knocked out of him.

"Don't flatter yourself, boy." Gran Torino doesn't move to let him up. "You're problem's plain as day to me. Maybe it is to you too, by now—you've stuck All-Might on a pedestal so high you need five stepladders just to reach it. And you've stuck your own quirk up there with him, haven't you?" He leans closer. "You've shackled yourself, boy. And until you shake 'em off, there's only so much I can do."

Gran Torino leaves him to chew over his failures (and clean up the mess they've made of his living room) and Izuku thinks.

Silently and aloud, he thinks. He's new to hero training, to having this kind of quirk. But if there's one thing he's good at, it's thinking.

And slowly, as the aches fade and Rei lets him bounce ideas off of her, things slowly start to fall into place. He scribbles notes, cudgels his brain back and forth, changes the angle of his thoughts several times. That night, he finds a secluded alley to put his tangled thoughts into practice. He isn't worried; there isn't much crime in this area, and he's always had pretty good night vision. With Rei keeping watch for trouble, he flings himself against the walls, wrestling with the power inside him. It leaves him exhausted and battered the following day—more than usual—and still he has nothing to show for it.

"It ain't your fault," Torino tells him, which isn't really a compliment at all—at best it's a very charitable comment—but Izuku will take what he can get. "That power always came naturally to All-Might. I'd say that's why his way of training ain't working for you." He barks out a laugh. "His body was all he had going for him. Didn't stop me from making him spew, back in the day."

Izuku winces in retroactive sympathy. He hums thoughtfully. "Um… Mr. Torino? Yesterday… I know you were sort of messing with me at the beginning, but you didn't answer my question." He hesitates. "*Is* that his name? Toshinori?"

The old hero considers him for a moment, then shrugs. “Ah, hell. You’ve been workin’ hard, I guess I can give you this one. Yeah. That’s his given name—Toshinori. And you didn’t hear that from—heh. What am I talking about. What do I care if he knows I told ya? I’d like to see him complain!”

They’re interrupted then by a package at the door.

In the end, it takes a microwave and an extremely mundane metaphor for everything to click.

Like a switch, really, if he’s going to be thinking in boring analogies from here on out. His upper limit is still only five percent of his power, but that five percent means a whole lot more if it’s spread evenly to every inch of his body.

How could he have been so dense? This whole time he’s been limiting himself, and limiting his new quirk—only for special occasions, only for certain parts of his body, only as an absolute last resort. But *this*—this feels right. This feels…

“Can you move like that?” Torino asks him, as One For All courses through him from head to toe.

“Good question,” Izuku grits out through clenched teeth. *Too rigid,* he thinks, and relaxes his jaw. He feels a cold poke from Rei’s finger on his arm, and carefully turns his head to look at her. “I think so. Maybe.”

Even over the hum of power and the pulse pounding in his ears, Izuku can hear Torino’s knuckles crack. “Would you like me to test that?”

He feels another smile pulling at the corners of his mouth. He wonders how he must look, with his teeth bared and lightning in his veins. “Please do.”

Torino quirks a grin back at him. “If you can maintain that, and still move with One For All coursing through you, that’ll be a pretty big step. So I’ll tell you what, kid.” He takes out a stopwatch. “You said you had questions, didn’t ya? Hold that for three minutes, and I’ll answer one. Anything your little heart desires.” The grin widens. “Land a clean hit on me, and I’ll answer all of ‘em.”

The kid grazes him. *Grazes* him. Torino dodges like he means it, and he still feels the brat’s knuckles skim against his face. It’s not a clean

hit, but it's something, and that means two things. One, Toshinori's judgment is maybe a little better than he thought. Two, there may be hope for this kid yet.

They sit down to a breakfast of microwaved taiyaki. Even without looking up, Torino can feel those busy little eyes fixed on him. He sighs.

"Welp. I'm a man of my word. So." He meets the kid's eyes. "Pick a question, and ask away."

Those eyes search his face again, watchful and wary, like their owner isn't sure whether to believe him. How cagey has Toshinori been with this kid, if a simple offer to answer a question gets a look like that? "Is there anything you won't talk about?" he asks. "I don't want to waste a question on an answer you won't give me."

"I've got thick skin, kid," Torino says dryly. "I said anything your little heart desires, and I meant it. Hurry up and ask."

It seems to take a moment for the kid to decide to believe him. Finally, face carefully blank, he asks.

"Who is Shimura Nana?"

The taiyaki crumbles into three pieces in his hand.

What. No—no, that's impossible. Toshinori never even told this kid his *name*, so how the hell—?

"You hear that name from All-Might?" Torino asks.

"Well," the kid says. "He… I…" His hands slowly clench into fists in his lap. "Let's just say—I don't think that name was something he meant for me to hear." He bites his lip. "I don't know anything about her. I just know she's important."

Torino heaves a sigh. Toshinori slipped up, from the sound of it. Spoke her name and the kid overheard. Though Torino has to wonder why Toshinori mentioned her, and to whom. Eh, he was always a mumbler, just like the kid he picked. Might be the death of them someday, if they don't get a handle on it.

Well. He's a man of his word.

"She was a good friend of mine," he says. He has to pause, there. It's

been years. Decades. It doesn't hurt any less. "A damn good friend. We fought together, back in the day. Couldn't tell you how many times she saved my life and I saved—" His voice catches. "We had each other's backs, is what I'm getting at."

"So she *was* a hero," the kid murmurs.

"Huh. You really don't know anything." There's no trace of deception on the kid's face. "She wasn't just a hero, kid. She wielded One For All before All-Might did."

For a moment, he's half convinced the kid is about to launch himself across the table. "She—*what*?" He's gone dead white.

"Yup."

"But she—I—" He clamps his mouth shut for a few moments, staring down at the table in front of him. His eyes are shining a little too much for it to be anything but tears. "You said she was your friend."

"I did."

"…She died, didn't she."

"…She did."

"How—"

"Eat," Torino says shortly. "Four minutes and you get another question."

The kid frowns, looks ready to argue with him, but then his eyes soften. It's all Torino can do not to snap at him for looking like that—like Torino's somebody who needs his sympathy. "Yes sir."

This kid has a long couple of days ahead of him.

"How did she die?"

"Killed in the line of duty. Not every hero gets to live long enough to look like me."

"Do you know any details about… about how she died?"

"…If you want to ask me if I was there, then just say it."

"…"

"I wasn't. …No one was."

"When did she die?"

"Decades ago. Can't remember the exact year. Only time I ever drank in my life was to forget it."

"Were she and All-Might close?"

It's the following day when the kid finally gets to this question. Torino takes a little while longer to answer this one. "Maybe," he says. "Maybe they might've been."

"What do you mean?" Even looking away, he can feel those wide eyes boring into him, like this kid's trying to read the answer off his brain cells before Torino has the chance to say it out loud. "Did something… happen between them?"

"No. Nothing happened. That was the whole problem." Torino meets his stare. "There was never a chance. Kid, did he tell you how he used to know me?"

"He said you were his homeroom teacher, his first year at UA."

"I sure as hell was," Torino tells him. "And there's a *reason* I was the one training him back then."

He already knows the kid's a sharp one. He can see the exact instant that the answer hits home, without any help from him. "You mean…"

Torino heaves a sigh. He's been doing that a lot in the past couple of days. "I think he was a little younger than you are now, when she died," he says. "She'd gotten him started, passed the torch, and… well. She dragged a promise out of me, that I'd train him if anything happened to her. Practically made me swear in blood. Sometimes I wonder if she didn't know she was on her way out."

The next training bout between them seems extra-vicious, extra-desperate. It seems the kid doesn't like those answers. By this point Torino is sick of questions and sick of waling on this kid, and sharply aware that he'll pick up bad habits if he only trains against one person using the same battle tactics.

“I think that’s it for practical training,” he says, as the boy staggers up and wipes his nose. “Any more, and both of us’ll start getting predictable.”

“I think I can keep going, but all right,” the boy says. “So what now, then?”

“What now? It’s time to do what you came here for. On-the-job training, remember?” Torino pushes down the old creeping thoughts and feelings, things that he tried to make himself forget years ago. He shows his teeth in another grin. “Get dressed, kid. We’re gonna do some villain clean-up.”

The boy carefully rolls a crick out of his shoulders. “So soon?” he asks.

“Whaddaya mean, soon?” Torino snorts. “Work experience was the whole point of this from the beginning, remember? You just needed a few days to play catch-up.”

“Right.”

“Hope you’re able to stay awake.”

“Huh?” The boy blinks owlishly at him, and the dark circles under his eyes stand out like bruises.

Torino sighs. “Never mind. Gearup, I’m calling us a cab.”

The kid joins him outside shortly, dressed for work and still looking like he hasn’t slept in weeks. Torino’s starting to wonder if he actively cultivates that look on purpose to throw people off. It hasn’t seemed to slow him down much during combat training. And if Torino weren’t as observant as he is, he would make the mistake of thinking the kid looks too tired to be paying attention. One look at his eyes, especially the way they never waver long from looking at Torino, tells him that thinking like that is the wrong way to go.

It’s… certainly not useless, if the kid’s doing it on purpose. A villain could make that mistake easily, and pay for it. If there’s one thing Torino knows, it’s the value of being underestimated.

“So where are we going?” his pupil asks.

“Heading back to the main Tokyo metropolitan area,” Torino replies. “Because—well. Can you think of why?”

The kid's eyes narrow in thought. "Well… it's more urban. More people there than here. It's the kind of place I used to go to look for hero battles."

Torino shoots him a glance. "Skirmish chaser, are ya? Why am I not surprised." He had this kid pegged as a fanboy, but this confirms it.

"I didn't… have a quirk, before One For All," the boy replies quietly as the two of them get in the cab. "I figured my best bet for, um, being a hero without one, was figuring out strategies."

Torino grunts in acknowledgment, chewing over this new bit of information. Toshinori passed the torch to another quirkless kid—also not surprising. "Well, you're right, more or less. Higher population density means higher crime rate. In places like Shibuya, that means you have skirmishes happening every day of the week."

"We're going to Shibuya?"

"Yep."

"By bullet train?" the boy asks. "For Shinjuku from Koufu, right?"

"That's the one," Torino answers. "Why do you ask? Worried about it getting dark?"

"Not really, I have pretty good night vision." The boy shrugs. "We'll be passing through Hosu, that's all. One of my friends is there."

"Well, that's all fine and good, but you just focus on where *you* are, got it?"

"Yes, sir."

Torino regards him for a moment more, but says nothing until they're getting out of the cab at the train station. "So. Any more questions?"

This gets a startled blink out of his tagalong, before a more thoughtful look crosses his face. "No," he says at length. "Not for you, anyway."

Sounds like Toshinori has a proper grilling to look forward to. "I see," he says. "Makes me wonder why you bothered asking me all of this, instead of the man himself." He shot a glance toward the kid. "He dodge your questions, or what?"

"Sort of," the boy says, with a shallow little sigh. "I guess… I get the feeling there're things he's not ready to talk about."

“Some of these ‘things’ are decades old, boy,” Torino told him. “An excuse like ‘not ready’ can only carry you so far.”

“I don’t want to press him,” he says. “I can relate.”

“So you press me instead?”

“I’m sure you could’ve shut me up if you really wanted to.”

Torino leads the way to the appropriate train, shaking his head. *Hell, Toshinori. What on earth have you brought me?*

As it turns out, the answer to that is “a typical teenager.” The second they’re seated on the train, out comes the smartphone. Torino’s eyes roll heavenward. Kids these days and their *texting* and *memes*.

He does look worried about something, frowning down at that bright little screen. Won’t do—Torino needs this brat focused if he hopes to teach him anything useful.

Before Torino has the chance to scold him for getting distracted, the kid’s spine goes ramrod-straight, and he looks around, wide-eyed and startled like he’s heard something. His mouth opens like he’s about to say something, but the train slams into an emergency stop before he has the chance, sending the kid face-first into the seat in front of him. Torino would normally be thoroughly amused by this, but the half-conscious pro hero that comes crashing through the train not three seconds later puts a bit of a damper on things.

There’s a hole in the train.

Izuku can feel the evening breeze wafting into the damaged car. Torino gives him an order, and Izuku forgets it the moment he hears it. Not that it matters—the old hero doesn’t stick around long enough to enforce it anyway.

“Rei,” he hisses through clenched teeth. “Find Iida. Now.”

Her dark hair billows in a breeze of her own making, and she vanishes from his side without a sound. Izuku braces himself at the gaping hole in the train, pays no mind to the hapless employee shouting at him, and launches himself out into empty space.

There are quite a few things that Iida Tensei regrets.

He regrets not kissing his mother goodbye, that last day. He'd been in a hurry, with the Hero Killer on his mind, and he hadn't thought he'd need to.

He regrets walking into that alley alone, with no backup and no one knowing he was there.

He regrets not fighting harder.

He regrets giving up, letting himself slip away on the cold, dirty ground with a slashed spine and blood in his eyes, before he could give his mother that kiss or tell Tenya to inherit his name.

And now, he regrets letting Midoriya Izuku walk away in the train station, instead of dragging him back to Tenya and saying *Something is wrong, I don't know what, please help me fix this*.

He'd misread his little brother. He'd misread *everything*—willfully so, even. Maybe he knew, deep down, what was going through Tenya's head. Maybe he knew exactly what was happening, and he'd been simply unwilling to accept that Tenya would really do something like that.

He's just in it for the general experience. No one's better for that than Manual.

He misses you. He's upset and hurting. He's finally taking Mom's advice and Midoriya's advice and taking the time he needs to heal.

But it's not until the hero Manual turns to Tenya and says, "This is kind of awkward to ask, but… you're after the Hero Killer, aren't you?" that Tensei realizes just how badly he's screwed up, how absurdly he's fooled himself.

He's an idiot. They're in Hosu. Tenya picked one of the most boring options for training. He's not taking it easy—since when has Tenya ever taken anything easy in his life?

What the hell else would he be doing here?!

Tensei has only a few minutes to panic and wonder before everything promptly goes to hell. There are creatures everywhere—those staring empty things, Noumu—villains are attacking, Hosu is in chaos, and Tenya slips away in the confusion.

"Don't." He trails after his little brother, pleading with him as if that's

going to make a difference. “Tenya, please go back. Don’t go looking for him. Don’t make that mistake.”

His words fall on deaf ears.

The dead are what give it away, in the end. Men like Stain are never as alone as they think they are, not with their victims always following, always watching. The other seventeen don’t have little brothers to watch over, so they follow their killer, waiting for the day that he can finally see them and hear them. Tensei hears them before Tenya reaches the alley. He hears their shouts, their warnings, their desperate urging and cursing. Stain must have found another victim.

If Tensei doesn’t do something, he’s about to find another.

“Tenya, stop this.” He stands in his little brother’s path, for all the good that will do. “I don’t want this. You *know* I don’t want this—”

Tenya walks through him as if he isn’t even there.

Tensei doesn’t recognize the hero that Stain is poised to kill. It’s selfish, but he barely sees them—he barely sees the seventeen pale figures that surround Stain and watch and wait. His little brother’s voice is ringing raw against the close walls of the alley, and Tensei’s desperate hands pass through him like mist.

“*Please!*” His voice is useless, almost drowned out by Tenya’s challenge. “Tenya, please! Don’t do this! You can’t fight him—just run!”

Stain shrugs his little brother off, knocking back his furious attacks with open contempt. His blades hum through the air, and Tensei hasn’t had a pulse for over a week but he can feel his heart in his throat.

“I know you,” one of the dead heroes whispers. “You’re Ingenium, right? We were wondering when you were gonna show up. Thought you’d maybe moved on.” Sad, blank eyes turn back to his struggling brother. “Guess you had somebody else to look out for, huh?”

Tenya loses his helmet in the scuffle, and the other ghosts wince at his young face.

“Poor kid.”

“Not long now.”

One of the dead heroes nudges her neighbor. “Hey, you’re good with kids, aren’t you? Think you can calm him down when he joins us?”

“I’ll try. They never train you for this.”

“He’s still alive!” Tensei snaps. Terror makes his temper short. “Don’t just write him off—he isn’t dead yet!”

The first hero that spoke to him looks at him with a face filled with sympathy. “How much of a chance do you think he stands?”

“One cut, and it’s over.”

Tensei’s eyes burn with tears.

Tenya is speaking again. “I got some advice from a friend,” he says. “He told me to do something useful. Something helpful. Something that matters to someone.” His hands curl into fists. “I can’t think of anything that matters more than this.”

“Damn it, no!” Tensei shouts. “That wasn’t what he meant, and you know it!”

“But you aren’t doing this to be useful, now, are you?” Stain drawls. His voice sends chills like crawling insects up Tensei’s back. “Otherwise you would have saved him already, don’t you think?” He nods toward the injured hero, whose murder Tenya interrupted.

“I’m here for my brother,” Tenya snarls. “Do you remember him, Hero Killer? You murdered him just a week ago.” Tensei has never seen his brother shake with rage before. “They said you ran off like a coward, and left him to die.”

“Thought you looked familiar.” Stain’s tongue flicks to one side. “Yeah, I remember him. It was nothing personal, you know. I wasn’t even trying to kill him.”

Tensei goes still.

“I meant to leave him alive. To fuel rumors. I figured he had backup coming anyway—imagine my surprise when no one came.” Tensei trembles, and he remembers sticky blood and cold brick and creeping darkness in his head. “Must’ve come after me on his own—another fake hero hoarding all the glory for himself. People like that always get what they deserve, in the end. I’m just here to help it along.”

“Shut up!” Tenya’s shout ricochets off the walls like a bullet.

“Tenya, don’t listen to him!” Tensei voice cracks, raw with desperation. “He’s baiting you—don’t fall for it! Just run away! Just this once! You have to live!”

But Tenya can’t hear him. Tensei wonders if Tenya would care even if he could.

“The hero Ingenium.” His little brother speaks the name in a snarl. Stain’s eyes narrow in amusement. “That was the name of the hero you killed. And it’s the name of the hero who’s going to take you down.”

Until this point, Tensei has been frozen in horror, feet rooted to the spot. But the sound of that name—of *his* name, now Tenya’s—changes that. He wants to stay—he can’t leave Tenya, not like this. But staying… staying means doing nothing. Staying means waiting for his little brother to die, watching it happen, letting it happen—

And he *can’t*. God help him, he can’t.

But if he leaves—if Tenya dies, and he’s not there—

One of the dead heroes sees his struggle, sees the way he looks desperately toward the streets beyond this alley. “Got somewhere to be, Ingenium?”

“I—I can’t leave him.” Not here, not with that monster. “He’s my little brother—he’ll *die*—”

“He’ll die if you stay, too.” The hero who tells him this speaks in a rasp, his throat laid open. “Not like you can do anything for him now.”

And that’s what does it, for Tensei. That’s what gives him the strength —or weakness—to turn away from Stain, turn his back on Tenya, and *move*.

It barely occurs to him that there may be no point to all this. It barely even enters into his mind that Midoriya’s assignment was nowhere near Hosu, and this could all be for nothing, and Tenya could die all alone while he’s gone.

Because there’s a chance. As long as Midoriya Izuku exists, there is a chance that he can get the message to *someone* and maybe, just

maybe, he won't have to regret letting his baby brother die all alone in an alley like he did.

The streets of Hosu are a battleground, battered by heroes' quirks and torn apart by disfigured monsters. Evening darkens overhead, lit by city lights and spreading fires. Heedless, Tensei flies through it. Not long ago, he would have joined the fighting, thrown himself into protecting civilians and beating back the creatures that threaten them. But he is not a hero anymore—just a dead man who has nothing left to fear but seeing his family follow him too soon.

The living scream, the dead wail, and Tensei pitches his voice above the rest, calling the name of his brother's friend. Maybe someone will hear. Maybe the dead will hear, and pass the message along—*find Midoriya Izuku*—find the only person in the world who can hear us—

A scream rends the air.

At least, "scream" is the best word Tensei can guess for it. Most human throats could never make a sound like that, quirk or no quirk. Tensei turns toward it, wavering, and finds himself looking at a black hole writhing in the middle of the street.

No one, dead or alive, will go near it—only those twisted creatures, Noumu, don't seem to mind. The blackness thrashes, ever shifting like a living, angry thing.

Villain, Tensei thinks. *Or Noumu.* Some terrifying, destructive quirk, sending fear like driven nails into even Tensei's dead heart.

Except he's wrong. In the next instant the darkness shifts, and Tensei sees the very heart of it. He sees a pale face, and a child's white nightdress.

Not living. Not angry. Dead, surrounded by Noumu and very, very frightened.

Tensei is frightened, too. The creatures are frightening, Stain is frightening, and Rei herself is frightening. But even if his heart no longer beats, even if his title of hero ended the moment his life did, there are some things that simply will not die. And deep in Tensei's heart the desire remains, ever-burning and strong.

When faced with a lost, frightened child, Iida Tensei will never walk away.

Deafened by her screaming, Tensei plunges into the darkness and finds the little girl at its heart. He gathers her in his arms and carries her away, even as she twists and struggles and claws at him.

"It's all right! It's all right. It's just me. Tensei, remember? You know me. You were teaching me how to sign." He spells her name with his hands, and she stills in his arms. "I need your help, Rei. Where is Midoriya?" She squirms again until she's free of him and facing him. Desperate hope fills him at the sight of her. He can feel himself fraying at the edges, torn apart by fear and worry and guilt, and he fights to keep himself together. "Is he close? Rei, *please*—please take me to him. It's Tenya. He's in danger—*he'll die*—"

She makes no sound, but grabs his hand and yanks.

What else can he do now, but follow?

Izuku has next to nothing to go on. Iida hasn't answered his messages since they last parted ways at the train station, two days ago. All he knows is that Iida is somewhere in this ward, and Stain's victims always show up in alleys.

Well that's useful, isn't it. How many alleys could one city possibly have?

The ghosts won't answer him. They're too busy watching the carnage, or running from it out of some leftover sense of self-preservation that they don't need anymore. At this point his only hope is Rei, and maybe, if he can find him—

"*Midoriya!*"

Or, Izuku thinks with a leaping heart, Tensei will find him.

His relief dies as quickly as it comes, when Tensei's scream reaches him again. Iida's brother catches up to him as he ducks into yet another empty alley, and when Izuku turns to greet him, he finds icy fingers clawing at him, driving him back against the wall. Rei is with him, her black eyes wild.

Tensei… doesn't look like Tensei anymore. He looks like what Izuku imagines the hero Ingenium looked like, on the day he died. The armor is there—not sleek and polished chrome like it ought to be, but dented, grimy, and torn open. Everyone in Tokyo knows that distinctive helmet—few have ever seen it like this, caved in as if with

a blade or an axe, smeared with blood around the slits nearest the mouth.

The sound of Ingenium's breath rattles harshly in Izuku's ears. It's only through years of practice listening to voices like this that he can even understand the words.

"*Save him.*"

The brick wall is cold against his back. His blood feels colder. "Iida?"

"*Stain—in an alley—he's alone!*" The helmet falls away, and Tensei's ruined face chokes on blood as the ghost pleads with him. "*I left him alone—he'll kill him—help me!*"

"Show me where," Izuku chokes out.

Fear is an old friend, but he has never known terror like this. With One For All coursing through him, he chases Tensei through the ravaged streets, ignoring heroes and villains alike. He may as well be deaf and blind, trailing after his friend's dead brother as he drowns in fear and *runs*.

The Hero Killer killed Tensei, and now he has Iida, and how much time has been lost? How long has Tensei been looking for him? How long would it take for Ingenium's murderer to kill Iida?

Stain left him in an alley to die, like he was trash. Tensei died all alone, waiting and waiting for someone to help, but nobody came.

How long has Iida been waiting?

I'm coming, Izuku thinks as his eyes sting and his lungs burn. *It's not going to be like that, because I'm coming. I'm coming I'm coming I'm coming Iida hold on just stay alive hold on keep breathing don't die don't die don't die!*

He's slow. Damn it, he's so *slow!*

He chases Tensei's back, and his terror makes him see Iida's back instead—pale, washed out, bloody and spectral, blank white eyes, just one more dead face among thousands—

I won't let it happen. I'm coming.

"There!"

They reach the alley, and Izuku sees the hunched figure of Stain standing poised over over a crumpled motionless body on the ground. His world goes red.

When it comes back, he stands on his own two feet, one fist smarting, and realizes two things as he faces the Hero Killer.

The first is that the alley is crowded.

Tensei and Rei are beside him or behind him, out of his line of vision, but of course the Hero Killer would be surrounded by ghosts. Izuku counts seventeen in all. Some of them are faces he recognizes from news reports, others are unknown to him. Some of them wear the wounds they died with, others do not. The one thing they have in common is death, at the hands of the sole living man who stands before him.

And Izuku's eyes well up to the brim with tears, because the second thing he realizes is that Iida is not among them.

He's almost afraid to look over his shoulder, but this is a fear that he is used to. Trembling, he forces his head to turn so that he can look down at the figure lying on the ground.

Iida stares back at him, wide-eyed and motionless and very much alive.

His eyes spill over.

No, not yet. He's still in danger.

You're both in danger now.

"Midoriya," Iida's voice is hoarse, as if he's been yelling—has he been calling for help? "You—*how?*"

Izuku faces forward again, and finds the Hero Killer watching him through narrowed eyes. Izuku meets his gaze in the dim light from a far-off street lamp, and he could swear he sees a look of surprise flash across Stain's face, but it's brief enough that it could just be his imagination. "It's okay, Iida," he hears himself say. It's not true in the slightest, but Izuku is no stranger to lying. "I won't let him kill you."

"Midoriya," Iida growls, and Izuku has never heard his friend sound like that. "You need to get out of here, *now!*"

Stain cocks his head, almost birdlike in his curiosity. “Huh. You must be the friend he mentioned.”

“You must be the Hero Killer,” Izuku says, trying to match the Hero Killer’s frigid composure.

“The one who told him… what was it?” Stain’s tone is light and thoughtful. “Be useful? Do something that matters? That’s what he told me, before he attacked.”

Izuku feels cold. “W-what?”

“Go!” Iida shouts at him. “Don’t get involved! This is *my* fight!”

But Izuku does not. He doubts he could even if he wanted to, because now he can’t stop *shaking*.

It ought to be fear that makes him shake, but it isn’t. Fear is for keeping him out of danger, and since he’s already in danger, it’s useless to him. So instead, it hardens and twists up inside him until it feels less like fear and more like anger. He takes in a breath that hisses through grinding teeth.

“Can you move, Iida?” he asks. “We can make it back out to the main street if we’re quick.”

It takes his friend a moment to answer. “No. It must be his quirk—Midoriya, just *go*.”

“He cuts you, Midoriya,” Tensei whispers. “Whatever happens, don’t let his blades touch you.”

“Wait, he can see us?” one of the dead heroes murmurs.

“Get out of here, kid!” another shouts to him. “Get help!”

“I can’t,” Izuku says out loud.

“Yes you can!” Iida yells. “I told you, this has nothing to do with you!”

Tension grips his shoulders, running from his clenched teeth to his clenched hands.

“If you’re going to talk,” he grits out, at Iida or at the dead heroes crowding the alley. “Then tell me something I can use.”

“It’s not just cutting!” another hero pipes up. “He swallows the blood!

That's how he gets you!"

"I don't want you rescuing me!" Iida yells. "This is my fight! Do you understand me? He killed my brother!"

And it happens again—the anger wells up and turns his thoughts black. It makes him cruel. "If you don't want me rescuing you," he says, in a quiet voice that chills even him. "Then you can come over and stop me whenever you feel like it."

Iida goes quiet. Stain laughs out loud. The blade in the murderer's hands twitches as if it has life and eagerness of its own. "You see what I have to deal with," he says. "I have a duty to kill these men." Izuku blinks, looks further into the alley, and sees another hero sitting slumped—wounded but alive—against the wall. Stain steps forward, tongue flicking out as if tasting the air. "If you wish to stand in my way, then so be it. The weak shall be culled either way. So what will it be?"

Izuku curses himself silently. He should have found a pro to come with him, instead of rushing in blindly like a fool. Even if it was hard to explain, he could have come up with some excuse or lie. Too little too late, now.

Buy time, he thinks. *Buy time, and call for help.* He slips his phone out of its pouch, behind his back. He knows that screen like the back of his hand.

"Stop it!" Iida shouts at him again, and the ugly anger roils and twists within him, threatening to throw him off. "Run away, Midoriya! I told you, this has nothing to do with you!"

"Hey Iida," he says, with a level of calm that he does not feel. "If you're still looking for ways to be helpful, you can stop talking any time."

"Midoriya—!"

His head whips around, eyes scalding with unshed tears. He can almost see the words die in his friend's throat as he spits out his anger like venom. "I said *shut the fuck up, Iida.*"

A low chuckle reaches his ears, and he turns his burning eyes back to Stain. "Very well, then. I won't say no to another sacrifice."

"You don't have a choice," Izuku replies, and his voice is calm but

cold. The cajoling and affability that he used with Shigaraki will be useless here; this is no man-child that will bend an ear to flattery. This is a murderer with an agenda. “You’ve got no good reason to kill anyone in this alley.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Stain answers coldly. “I don’t expect a kid like you to understand what I have to do. This world is *rotten* with false heroes that are only in it for the paycheck, or the spotlight, and yet the people treat them as idols. It’s time they learned what true heroes ought to look like.”

As Stain talks, Izuku takes the time to send his message and palm his phone back into his pocket. “What, like you?” he asks. He looks for Rei, but she’s vanished from the alley.

Another laugh. “No. I’m the necessary evil—I cull the weak and the greedy, until only the worthy remain. Selfless heroes, who follow All-Might’s path. Who aren’t slaves to their own egos. Those are the only heroes worth existing.”

“Yeah, I don’t really care,” Izuku answers.

The alley goes dead-quiet. Iida is silent. Even the ghosts say nothing.

Stain’s eyes bore into him. “What?”

“I don’t actually care about why you’re doing this,” Izuku replies, and suddenly it’s a fight to keep the trembling out of his voice. “It doesn’t really matter to me, because… from what I can parse out, *what* you’re doing is killing people who save lives, just because you don’t like their *reasons* for saving lives.”

“Ah… A hero fan, are you?” Stain’s blistering scorn lashes at him. “A bright-eyed up-and-comer who thinks they can do no wrong. So naive.”

“*I’m* naive?” slips out before Izuku can stop it. His fists ache. “Y-You’re imagining a world where all heroes are perfect and never do anything for their own reasons! How is that *not* naive?”

“That’s what separates the real heroes from the rest of these pathetic phonies!” Stain snarls. “A proper ‘hero’ doesn’t act for his own benefit.”

“Why not? You do.” Izuku can tell he’s starting to get under Stain’s skin. He’s not sure if that’s a good thing or not. “Take now, for

instance. You benefit from doing this because you get to pat yourself on the back without actually doing anything helpful."

"...What."

"I said you're full of shit," Izuku says, a little louder.

"You little *brat*!" Stain snarls, but Izuku almost doesn't hear it over the sound of ghostly laughter echoing in the narrow alley.

"Midoriya, get out of here!" Iida's voice has turned from angry to pleading.

"Your reasons don't make any sense to me. Sorry." His hands curl into fists again, and he meets Stain's eyes with a heated glare. "You talk like having selfish reasons makes people evil, but saving lives will *always* be a pure good."

The dead heroes' eyes are all on him. His voice cracks, but he forges ahead.

"And anyone can do it. It doesn't matter who they are, or where they're from, or what they've done, or why they're doing it." The shaking stills. He looks at each pale, white-eyed face surrounding the Hero Killer, and stands as tall as he can. "All they have to do is say 'no.' All they have to do is say, 'This is wrong.'" His lips pull back, and it feels more like baring his teeth than smiling. "Anyone. Even thieves and bullies and liars and cowards."

He steps forward again, directly between Iida and the Hero Killer.

His eyes are dry.

"So this is me, saying 'no,'" Izuku says. He faces the Hero Killer and braces himself to fight, praying that his message will reach someone. "So help me, if you lay another hand on them, I will *break it*."

Stain's eyes widen. The grin on his face shows a few more teeth than before. "Well. You might just be worth keeping alive after all."

*My little brother needs help, he needs help, he's in danger he needs help help h**elp HELP HELP***

There's no one else, only ghosts, only enemies only monsters

black monsters with rolling eyes and they can't feel I can't feel I dig deep,

deeper, and deeper but there is nothing on the surface and nothing below and they are full of nothing nothing n o t h i n g

Someone! Anyone! He called for help! He called for help, he called EVERYONE for help but

nobody came

nobody answered

please

somebody

anybody

There!

There he is! I've found him! I know him! My little brother knows him! He was cold before but now they're friends and he

He sees it. He sees my little brother's call for help. He's stopped.

Yes! Read it! Answer him!

Help him!

He won't. He doesn't know. He's taking too long! My little brother will die if he takes too long! ***Hurry up!***

I reach in. He does not hide behind the cold anymore and I feel it—worry confusion heart pounding why why why what does this mean what is he trying to say—

He's saying he needs help, stupid! He's asking for help!

i dig deeper, claw through fog, past the confusion and the what-why-where until—there!

There's worry and worry means fear, it means there's danger everywhere, what does this message mean, what if he's there, what if he's in trouble what if he needs help what if he gets hurt what if he dies what if what if what if—

I grab his fear before it can get away.

*I **pull.***

The message is a perplexing one, to say the very least. It's practically nothing, just an address not far from where Shouto is now. He stares at his phone, confused—why would Midoriya send this to him? The city is a battleground, so why—?

Is there something here?

Is he asking to meet up?

Is he—

What if—

All at once, his thoughts slam to a halt, and the fog of confusion is ripped to shreds in his mind. Shouto stops in his tracks, nearly dropping his phone as he chokes on perfectly good air and fights against the bile creeping up his throat. Fear is a familiar thing. With a father like Endeavor, it is never far away. But this fear—it's not the kind that makes him freeze, or that makes him want to turn and run. No, the pulse in his ears is like thunder as his heart sends terror pounding through his veins, chasing every other thought from his head until a single question remains.

What if he's in trouble?

"Shouto, pay attention!" Terror walls him off from his father's voice. "Stop looking at your phone and look at me!"

And in the end, he does turn and run, but not to flee. Without another thought, Shouto whips around, points himself in the direction of the address in Midoriya's message, and *flies*. His feet pound the pavement, leaving hot asphalt and patches of frost wherever they touch. Fear sends icy claws spidering up and down his spine, far colder than his quirk could ever hope to be.

He doesn't know what he's running toward. He only knows that there is danger everywhere, villains and Noumu and rampant destruction, but none of it is more terrifying than the thought of his friend in trouble.

Chapter End Notes

CW: Discussions of grief and loss, blood and injury, attempted

murder of a child by an adult.

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

I have a cool announcement and some awesome art to share!

Yesterday Upon The Stair now has a TV Tropes page!! Big thank you to whoever started that, and if any of you guys are interested in contributing to it, that'd be awesome!

Okay so there's a lot of art to link today, here goes nothing!

From blushpuppy on Tumblr we have these two lovely drawings!

Etsukow made these pencil-drawn comics.

Kaijue drew Izuku being sassy with a serial killer.

Rei portraits! One by rainbowderpyarts and another by yasung!

Spookyzuku and Rei submitted by cartoon-caity.

Alzheimersparrotroute drew Izuku and some of his ghost fam.

Nuro-chan drew Izuku's weapon-grade smile!

And finally, an anon submission of Izuku, Rei, and a kitty-cat!

THAT'S SO MUCH ART YOU GUYS, THANK YOU!

Welp, enjoy the art, enjoy the trope age, and enjoy the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuku would be lying if he said he wasn't unsure of himself, with Rei gone. She's always been by his side whenever he's in a pinch, but now she's vanished. There are other ghosts here too, but none of them are her. And besides—in a close alley like this, they could end up being a disadvantage. It's crowded for Izuku, but not for Stain.

"Midoriya." Iida's voice is quiet, but it still sends a jolt of anger and hurt spiking through Izuku until his fists clench.

Later, he thinks. *Deal with that later.*

Out loud he says, “Don’t get in the way.” It probably hurts Iida to hear him say that, but Izuku’s eyes are on the dead. Their spectral forms shift, and the eighteen ghosts move to give him room.

Before Stain makes a move, Izuku calls One For All into his body and launches himself forward. *Full Cowl.* It’s nice to have a proper attack now—one that he can use freely. Stain’s blade flashes out, and Izuku ducks beneath it.

Don’t get cut. One cut and it’s over.

Speed is key here; for all his talk, he knows that simply stonewalling Stain won’t work. He’s no All-Might; he can’t shut down attacks with raw power. No, if he’s going to get himself, Iida, and the injured hero through this alive, then he has to be fast enough, and smart enough.

“Watch your left arm!” the hero with the slashed throat warns.

Izuku jerks his arm away and twists, narrowly avoiding a cut. His teeth clench in a tense grin. Having eighteen spectators on his side doesn’t hurt.

Stain is fast, and it’s all Izuku can do to keep up. But that’s all right, isn’t it? It’s not like he expects to take down the Hero Killer himself. He just needs to keep up, keep his attention, and keep from getting cut, long enough for help to arrive.

Someone has to come.

Stain’s blade hums dangerously close to his face again, and Izuku dodges it. But it’s a feint; while Izuku is busy worrying about the blades, Stain lashes out with his free hand and slams Izuku face-first into the alley wall.

Stars explode in his vision, and Izuku shoves off the wall and blinks them away just in time to see Stain lunging for Iida again.

“No!” It’s a stupid move, what he does next. He keeps low and dives between Stain’s legs, ready to get between him and Iida again if that’s what it takes. Skidding to a halt, he whips back around and braces himself for Stain’s attack.

Only Stain isn’t attacking; in the time it takes for Izuku to turn and face him, Stain has returned to the very spot where Izuku was standing just seconds before. The Hero Killer reaches out, fingertips brushing the wall.

“Shit—Midoriya, stop him!” It’s Tensei who cries out, galvanizing Izuku into a desperate lunge before he even knows what he needs to stop Stain from doing.

He’s mid-step, his balance off, when his limbs suddenly lock. It’s only then that he registers the warm trickle down his face.

He’d bloodied his nose against the wall.

A split second before Izuku hits the ground, he sees Stain finish licking blood from his fingers. Petrified, he rolls over from his own momentum until he’s crumpled on his side, looking back at Iida with wide eyes.

No.

“No.” Tensei echoes his thoughts in a small voice.

A shadow falls across him. Stain steps over him, smooth and nonchalant as a cat. Izuku strains against his invisible bonds, but his body won’t respond.

“Stop.” He can still speak, for all the good that does. “Stain—*don’t*. This won’t prove anything—you can’t—”

“So hasty,” Stain says. “That’s your trouble. If you’d only slowed down, you would have found them peacefully.” He glances over his shoulder and meets Izuku’s eyes briefly. “Now you get to watch.”

“Don’t.” His voice shakes. He’s never done this before—never watched a ghost be made. He doesn’t want to see that. He doesn’t want to see Iida like that—not yet, not ever. “He won’t prove anything. We’re not even heroes—not yet.”

“Midoriya, stop,” Iida grits out.

“Casualties in every war,” Stain says grimly. “That is the way of the world. It’s for the best. Better to end such a tainted dream before it can be fulfilled.”

“Iida, move.” Izuku feels tears coming again, burning their way out of his eyes. “You have to move—there has to be a limit to his quirk, you have to *try*—”

The blade thrusts downward. Izuku hears Tensei *scream*.

And then the alley lights up, red-gold and blinding.

When Izuku's sight comes back to him, and the colored spots have faded from his vision, the fire has driven Stain away from Iida before his blade could touch him. Rei is crouching over Izuku, her hair brushing against his face.

At the mouth of the alley, flames trail from Todoroki's outstretched fingertips, while ice forms on the right side of his face. His eyes are on Stain, flickering briefly to Izuku. There's something in them that Izuku hasn't seen before—something very close to fear. In spite of that, his voice is steady—casual, even.

"You couldn't have been more specific?"

Sorry, Rei adds. *He took too long. I made him hurry.*

"Todoroki?" Iida gapes at their classmate. "What—how?"

"Midoriya, Iida," Todoroki says quietly, stepping further into the alley. "Are you injured?"

"No." Iida sounds reluctant. "But we can't move."

"It's his quirk," Izuku answers through grinding teeth. "If he swallows your blood, it paralyzes you. Don't let him cut you."

Todoroki nods. "Noted." His right hand sweeps forward, and a wave of ice ripples across the pavement.

Izuku doesn't relax—far from it. But something in his chest settles. Todoroki stands a far better chance of evading Stain's power than he does. It's not just that he's objectively a better fighter; he's a long-range fighter, and he can keep Stain at bay with fire and ice without risking getting cut.

With that settled, Izuku focuses on trying to move again.

No quirk is the end-all be-all. There's always a limit, always a downside, always a weakness or an opening somewhere. Rei, ever helpful, give him a sharp slap to the back of the head, but—no. It's not like Shinsou's quirk.

A time limit, maybe?

Stain is fast—much faster than Izuku was, when he was fighting Todoroki. He's swift and well-armed, with eighteen murdered heroes to speak for his skill in a fight. Todoroki's quirk is powerful, but

lopsided. He isn't used to his fire, and in a narrow space like this, he can't brute-force his way to victory without risking the safety of everyone else here.

Izuku grinds his teeth until his head hurts, as he watches Stain dodge another focused barrage of ice. He hasn't even broken a bone yet, and he's already a liability right out of the gate. Splintering ice coupled with the heat from Todoroki's left side throw up a mist, and for a moment Izuku's view of the fight is hazy—and so is Shouto's.

Rei shrieks in fury, and one of the dead heroes cries out. "He's going for his knives! Kid, warn your friend!"

Izuku's heart goes to this throat, and it's a miracle he manages to speak through it. "Todoroki, he has throwing knives!" he yells.

He's a second too late; two knives come sailing through the settling mist, just as Todoroki responds to his warning. A wide pillar of ice bursts from the ground at his feet, catching one of the knives before it can reach him. The other clatters to the ground behind him, and the alley echoes with Todoroki's cry of pain.

Izuku's heart lurches. Blood trickles down Todoroki's right arm, and he clutches at the wound with his left.

"No!" Iida's not far from where Izuku lies, straining against the paralysis. "*Damn it*—" His eyes are wild and desperate as they turn to Izuku. "Why did you call him here?" he hisses through clenched teeth.

"Iida." The black anger rises in his chest, making his voice shake. He knows, *he knows,* and he didn't mean for this to happen, he didn't mean for Todoroki to come alone. That was why he sent the message to *everyone*.

"No one else was supposed to get involved! No one else was—"

"Don't let him near the knife!" Izuku yells, forcing his attention back to Todoroki.

"I know." Todoroki grits his teeth. He can't even stop to bind his wound, because Stain doesn't give him that chance.

In the next moment he moves—though not toward Todoroki. Stain's eyes are fixed on Izuku as he lunges, blade raised. He's already close; Izuku and Iida are further into the alley, while Todoroki stands at its entrance.

As the Hero Killer flies toward him, Izuku's brain makes a few rapid-fire observations.

Stain is much closer to him than Todoroki is.

Todoroki isn't used to his fire yet, especially in an enclosed space like this.

With his right arm wounded, his aim with ice might be off, and he can't direct it with his foot without hurting Izuku.

A long range attack isn't going to save him.

Izuku sees ice forming at Todoroki's right foot—not to attack but to propel—and he sees both Todoroki's intentions and Stain's plan.

Stain pulled the same thing with him, didn't he?

"Don't!" he yells, desperately. "It's a trap—he's drawing you in—"

But he can't know whether or not it's a bluff, and neither can Todoroki. He can't know that Stain won't follow through if Todoroki doesn't give him what he wants.

Todoroki launches himself into the alley, fire already blazing at his left arm. Stain is fast, but Todoroki is faster, and the Hero Killer is forced to leave off attacking Izuku to defend himself. The flames turn Izuku's vision to colored spots again, and when they die down, Stain is nowhere near him.

"Knife—" Izuku warns, and Todoroki is already racing back toward the mouth of the alley.

Stain gets there first, snatching the bloodied knife off the ground. His tongue flicks out—

Todoroki falls, limbs locked in place, a few feet from where Stain stands. Iida's wordless cry sends needles into Izuku's heart.

"Todoroki, was it?" Stain's voice is as slick as oil. "Ahh, you must be Endeavor's boy." Todoroki spits a curse. "Now *this* is a privilege."

Izuku feels his spine go taut.

"Like begets like, after all," Stain says. "Perhaps this is good practice, for when I can finally destroy your bastard father." The blade at his side twitches, and begins to lift.

(Izuku sees Todoroki limp and bloody and still, Todoroki faded and spectral with white eyes, a corpse on the ground, ghost number nineteen, *Izuku called for help and he came running*—)

The paralysis shatters like glass, and Izuku launches himself through the air. It's a perfectly straight line, from the ground to Stain, and Izuku never thought that impact could feel so *right*, but there's a grim satisfaction in how he slams shoulder-first into Stain's gut that he'll maybe stop to worry about later. The angle of it sends Stain slamming into the wall by the mouth of the alley, and as Izuku crouches over Todoroki he feels his eyes *burn.*

"You okay?" He keeps his eyes fixed on Stain as the latter gets back to his feet.

"Fine." Is Todoroki staring at him? Izuku's eyes are on Stain but he can feel Todoroki staring at him. "How'd you break free?"

"Good question." It can't be his own desperation or anger that let him break free, as much Izuku would like to think so. If it had been that simple, then he would have broken free when Stain threatened Iida.

"Look out!" The cry comes from… someone. Iida—Tenya or Tensei, Izuku isn't sure—or one of the crowd of watching ghosts. He sees Stain hurtling toward them again, and doesn't stop to think. Calling on One For All, he grabs Todoroki by the back of his combat vest and launches both of them out of the way of Stain's attack.

"Sorry," he mutters, teeth gritted. His own pulse is deafening. "I'm sorry. I thought more people would show up, or that they wouldn't come alone."

"Not your fault," Todoroki replies. In spite of the dire situation, he sounds almost sheepish. "I might've panicked a little. I'm usually better about that."

"Still don't know how I got free," Izuku murmurs. "Iida and that other hero were frozen before I got here. Can't be a time limit… I don't think *I* did anything…"

"It all comes down to luck, doesn't it?" Stain drawls. The end of his blade scrapes against the wall. "It's rarely character or actual worth. It all comes down to *luck*. Luck of birth. Of *parentage*." He spits the last word with a poisonous glare at Todoroki.

Todoroki's anger takes the form of a sharp hiss of breath. Izuku's jaw

clenches until it creaks, and only out of habit does he force the corners of his mouth upward before turning his bared teeth back to Stain. He remembers Okumura, twisted and contorted beyond any semblance of humanity, blaming Todoroki for Endeavor just like this murderer is doing.

He feels fire in his eyes and steel in his heart, feels his veins flood with ice water as he smiles at Stain with white, white teeth.

The blade hums, and Izuku ducks beneath it a split second before slamming elbow-first into Stain's ribs. He tries not to feel too satisfied at the quiet retching noise. He follows it up with another blow in the same spot, not wanting to give Stain the time to recover and react. The Hero Killer falls back, rolling with impact until he lands in a crouch. He flings a knife, which Izuku dodges easily, only for Stain to charge again while he's off balance.

"*Jump!*" At the sound of Todoroki's voice, Izuku doesn't think; he just does. One For All launches him upward, just as ice bursts forth in a wave beneath him. Stain barely gets out of the way in time.

Springboarding off the walls, Izuku manages to land further back, closer to where Iida and Todoroki lie. Except Todoroki is on his feet now, hand outstretched, no longer paralyzed. Izuku blinks at him, astonished, and the look Todoroki gives him is equally nonplussed.

"Did you do something?" Izuku asks as he turns back to Stain.

"No. The paralysis lifted on its own, I'm sure of it." Todoroki stands by him, still bleeding from his arm. Izuku finds himself breathing easier.

"I was the first to be paralyzed," a new voice speaks up. It's the still-living hero, Stain's original victim, sitting slumped against the wall. "I still can't move."

"What do we have in common, then?" Izuku asks, half to himself. "What makes us different from them?"

Todoroki sends ice rippling toward Stain again, keeping him at bay while they regroup. Izuku wracks his brain—*quirk type? Physical condition? Amount of blood ingested?*—when Todoroki's left hand closes on his arm. "Midoriya," he says. "What's your blood type?"

Blood type. "I'm Type O," Izuku says. "You?"

"Same." Todoroki turns his head. "Iida?"

“I’m… Type A,” Iida answers.

“I’m B,” the injured hero says.

“Might be it, then.” Izuku purses his lips thoughtfully. “Doesn’t help us much, though.”

“Clever you.” Stain’s chuckle rings out. “You have it right—blood type affects how long my quirk holds you in place. Not that it’ll do you much good.”

In spite of Stain’s menace, Izuku stands unshaken, shoulder to shoulder with Todoroki. They haven’t fought on the same side since the USJ, and this is no army of thugs or hulking Noumu or menacing pale man who destroys with a touch and adorns himself with severed hands. This is one man, and the two of them are standing between him and two murders.

“How’s your arm?” Izuku asks.

“I’ll live,” Todoroki replies. “But I can’t risk getting too close.”

“And I can’t fight long-range without breaking fingers,” Izuku says. “So it works out.” His eyes narrow. “If I keep him off you, can you cover me from a distance?”

Beside him, Todoroki nods. “I’ve got your back.”

That’s a first. Izuku can’t think of any living person who’s ever said that to him before. He steels himself, letting One For All course through him. “I shouldn’t talk like this, but… I don’t know if we can beat him ourselves.”

Todoroki is quiet for a moment. “Probably not,” he says at last, and something in his tone makes Izuku turn, to find his mouth crooking upward in a wry smile. “But we can at least make it look cool.”

In spite of himself, Izuku laughs.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Iida hisses at them through gritted teeth. “Just—stop this, I don’t want—*you’re both injured*.”

“We can still move,” Todoroki replies.

“But—”

“Give it a *rest*, Iida!” Izuku launches himself forward. His first strike is

a feint, and when Stain moves to cut him again, Izuku slams his fist into his ribs again. He hears Stain's grunt of pain, feels something—maybe bone, maybe cartilage—give, only slightly, beneath his fist.

He isn't quite sure, exactly, when his brain makes the switch from "buy time" to "take him down." Maybe enough time has passed that he can safely assume that they're on their own from here. Maybe Todoroki having his back is giving him a borderline-idiotic boost in courage. Maybe Iida still won't shut up and stop trying to convince them to leave, and this is Iida's fault for going off alone and Izuku's fault for not paying more attention when Iida still needed help and Stain's fault for killing Tensei and seventeen other people who were just doing their jobs—

Maybe it's because there are nineteen ghosts in this alleyway, and Izuku came within a hairsbreadth of seeing Iida and Todoroki join them.

Maybe he's just *angry*.

One of Stain's smaller knifes grazes his face as it zips past him. Izuku hears it hit the ground, hears Todoroki bury it in ice to keep Stain from getting to it. Warm blood trickles into his mouth, and Izuku barely suppresses the urge to spit it out.

Somewhere behind him, Iida's voice reaches him—*stop this, leave me, I don't want you two bleeding for me*

Izuku swallows liquid iron. *It's a little late for that,* he thinks. Maybe it slips out of his mouth, too. He's not really keeping track.

Stain launches himself past Izuku, dodging a blast of ice from Todoroki, and Izuku's body turns and carries him in pursuit before his mind has the chance to make a decision. Stain is fast, but One For All makes Izuku faster, and he reaches Todoroki just as Stain lunges in again, tongue flicking out in anticipation, eyes fixed on Todoroki's bleeding arm.

Enough of that tongue is outside of Stain's mouth for Izuku to reach out and grab it.

The noise that Stain makes is almost comical, and too much time exposed to open air makes his tongue tacky instead of slick. The Hero Killer pulls back, just as Izuku strikes him in the chin.

Stain *chokes*, and later Izuku will swallow down the urge to vomit

when he realizes that if his punch had been any more direct, he might have guillotined his tongue right off. As it is, the Hero Killer stumbles back, bleeding from the mouth, and gives Izuku a look that is downright murderous.

He'd hinted before, that he thought Izuku was worth keeping alive. Izuku wonders if this little stunt is enough to change his mind.

"Nice shot!"

"Holy *shit*, kid!"

"I could've thought of that."

"And yet here you are."

Stain is already coming at him again, and Izuku charges to meet him when Iida's voice cuts through the cheers of the dead, wracked with guilt and anger. "Midoriya, stop, he'll *kill you—!*"

"*Then stand up!*"

And Izuku is confused for a moment, because that sounds like something he'd want to say, but he's hearing it in Todoroki's voice. He's thrown—by anger, by fear, by how close his friends have come to dying already—enough for Stain to slice him again. The blade bites into his side, and he lunges recklessly in an attempt to grab for it, but his blood is already on Stain's wounded tongue. He falls petrified to his knees.

Stupid, stupid!

"If there's something you want to do, then *do it!*" Todoroki's voice echoes off the alley walls. "Don't waste your breath yelling at us!"

Stain moves like lightning, ignoring Izuku to make a run for his friends again.

"Todoroki, I'm sorry!" *Idiot, you were supposed to keep him away from them!* Stain's quirk brings him down to a kneeling position this time, and he strains against it. It won't be long. He'll be free soon.

The only thing between Todoroki and the Hero Killer is a wall of ice, and Rei. His friend claws at Stain, face twisting and contorting with rage, but Stain isn't Kirishima—if he feels the concentrated terror that hovers around Rei like a fog, he doesn't show it.

Flames burst forth from the ice wall, driving Stain back, but it's only a temporary fix. Mist and steam make it hard to see as Stain attacks again, heedless of flames and injuries and screaming little girl ghosts. And then—

A blur of white and silver.

Stain is fast and Izuku with One For All is faster, but speed is what Iida was born for.

The ice wall is gone, but Iida is on his feet, glasses askew and engines sputtering but once more perfectly ambulatory. Relief swells within Izuku's chest, threatening to burst, and his eyes sting until he has to blink hard just to see again.

Stain recovers from the blow before Iida recovers from his damaged engines, or before Todoroki recovers from the strain of using his quirk. Knives—damn it, how many knives does Stain *have?*—are in Stain's hands and then leaving his hands before Izuku has the chance to shout a warning.

Todoroki has no time to dodge, but Iida is *fast.*

The first knife takes Iida through the arm that he raises to shield Todoroki, puncturing through his costume. The second pierces his hand, sending him to his knees. Izuku's stomach turns at Iida's pained cry, and the look on Todoroki's face burns itself into his memory.

Stain's quirk releases him, and Izuku throws himself back into the fight.

The ghosts are silent now. Watching. Waiting.

Todoroki has left him plenty of ice to gain the high ground—can he make it? He can't afford to doubt. Izuku launches himself upward, just as Stain makes one more pounce toward his friends.

He doesn't even *see* Iida move. One moment his friend is standing by Todoroki, and the next, they're meeting in midair with Stain between them.

Pain shoots through his arm as his fist meets Stain's face, but not the blinding inferno of a shattered arm. He's pretty sure Iida manages to get a second kick in before they hit the top of the ice ramp that Todoroki sends up to catch them. Izuku lands awkwardly, on top of his injured arm, and he and Iida slide and tumble their way to the

ground just behind where Todoroki stands.

Stain lies still and silent on the ice, as limp as a broken doll.

The three of them—four, with the injured hero still paralyzed against the wall—wait on bated breath, but the Hero Killer is down for the count.

Cold, small hands bring Izuku back to something resembling alertness, and with Rei hovering by his side he climbs back to his feet and *oh dear, that doesn't feel very good at all*. Limping and stumbling on uneven, half-frozen ground, Izuku makes his way back toward the motionless villain.

"Midoriya—" he hears Iida say, distantly in the background, but he ignores him as he approaches Stain's side.

He's muttering again, probably—swearing a little, too—as he sets about relieving Stain of his knives. Within moments, he isn't alone. Todoroki joins him on one side, and on the other, the injured hero—now that Izuku has a chance to really look at him and think, he recognizes the hero Native—removes a few hidden blades from places Izuku wouldn't have thought to check.

They find some cords at a nearby trash heap, and before Izuku knows it, they're dragging the unconscious Hero Killer out of the alley. Well—Todoroki's doing the dragging. Iida's arms are a mess, and Izuku apparently looked unsteady enough that Native insists on carrying him out.

He tries to look at Iida. He really does. But it still hurts to look at him, especially with Tensei hovering over him anxiously. He'll look at Iida again when he stops seeing visions of his corpse and his ghost behind his eyelids.

"Iida." His voice is hoarse and dry. "Is it true, what he said? About… what I told you?" He almost can't force the words out. "About being helpful?"

Iida's silence tells him all he needs to know.

They're barely out in the open for half a minute when a familiar diminutive figure emerges from another cross street, and the twisting knot in Izuku's heart—when did that get there?—starts to loosen.

"*What the hell are you doing here?*" Gran Torino demands, and the next

Izuku knows, the old man's foot is colliding with his face. It's a gentle tap, by Torino's standards. "I thought I told you to stay put, you wet-behind-the-ears brat!"

"How much were you actually banking on me staying in that train?" slips out before Izuku's adrenaline-addled brain can think better of it.

Torino looks as if he'd like to kick him again, but Izuku looks half-dead and Native looks faintly alarmed, so he sighs. "Well, you're still alive at least," he grumbles. "For what it's worth, I'm glad."

Other heroes arrive then, and it seems Izuku's message wasn't as useless as he'd thought. Todoroki had alerted Endeavor, who'd sent other heroes on while he kept fighting those Noumu creatures. At this point, Izuku has recovered enough for Native to let him down, though Rei clings to his arm like she's afraid he'll topple over if she doesn't.

We're alive, he realizes, a little belatedly. He lists dizzily, but manages to catch himself on Rei before he falls.

"Y-you both…" Iida's voice makes both him and Todoroki turn. His friend has hung back, still battered and quiet. Izuku watches, and his vision goes from living-breathing Iida to dead-pale-white-eyes Iida whenever he blinks. "You both were injured because of me," he says, and his wounds make his bow of apology awkward and stiff. He's not so bent that Izuku can't see tears dripping from his eyes (he has eyes, they aren't blank white, not yet, not today). "I was so blinded, and because of that, you two—" His voice trails off.

Izuku's throat is thick with pain. *I tried to help, and it wasn't enough. I made things worse. He didn't listen. I tried so hard, and I couldn't stop it.*

"Pull yourself together." The words are blunt, but Todoroki's voice is not unkind when he says them. "You're the class president, remember?"

Iida wipes his eyes hurriedly, and looks to Izuku. "M-Midoriya? I-I want you to know that—"

"Iida." His own voice sounds far away to him, like he's listening to himself from the end of a long tunnel. There's a wave of *something* coming, something bad and rotten, something that feels like drowning and live burial, but he can't yet. Not yet. Later, but not yet. "I'm glad you're alive. I'm glad I was f-f-fast enough. But…" He can't tell if he's crying, only that his eyes hurt and he can't look at Iida for very long.

“Midoriya—”

“I need you to just—not talk to me. Just for a little while. Okay?” Izuku can’t lift his eyes again, and that makes him a coward, but he can’t look at his friend’s face after saying that. “Just—give me a minute. Or two. Or ten.”

Iida doesn’t reply, and Izuku stares at the ground and tries not to think about dead things. He doesn’t try hard enough.

“LOOK OUT!”

The call comes from Gran Torino, and Izuku looks to him, bewildered, then to Stain—but no, Stain’s still unconscious so why—?

And then there are claws digging into his back, and Izuku watches in blank bewilderment as the ground and all the people standing on it fall away to the sound of beating wings. He hears someone shout “Noumu,” before he turns his head to find talons clutching him as the winged creature carries him further into the air.

Oh, he thinks. *Those weren’t the last words I was going for.*

Rei rushes up after him, but as she draws close, Izuku sees her falter, screaming in confusion and terror. She won’t come near the Noumu, he realizes vaguely. He didn’t think anything could frighten Rei, but maybe they’ve finally found something that spooks her.

As quickly as it starts, it’s over—the claws release him, and before Izuku has the chance to panic, someone catches him around the middle and carries him the rest of the way to the ground. There’s a thank-you on the tip of his tongue, but—

“All these useless fucking phonies,” Stain hisses, dropping Izuku none too gently to the ground. “And these criminals who spread their filth like rats.” The Noumu is dead on the ground with one of Stain’s knives (mother*fucker*) in its brain, and seventeen dead heroes surround them. “That’s why my purge is necessary! For the sake of a just world!” He shoves Izuku into the ground. “You, though. You’re worth more alive.”

“I am not affiliated with you.” It’s hard to say with his face pressed to the pavement. Izuku’s about eighty-five percent sure he manages it.

Shouting reaches his ears—Endeavor is here, *finally, damn it, what took him so long?* Stain releases him and rises, and Izuku shoves himself up to a crouch, tense and ready for round two even though *he has never*

felt less ready for round two in his life—

Stain stands up, and all other thoughts flee from Izuku's mind.

"*Another phony,*" Stain snarls, and that's when words stop translating themselves to meaning in Izuku's brain. This close to Stain, he feels it sharp and raw in his mind, in his heart, in the pit of his stomach. For a split second the distilled terror floods him, and it takes a moment for his mind to reboot itself back to somewhere in the area of functioning. Stringy dark hair falls into his vision, and that's Rei, crouching over him, eyes black, teeth bared.

It feels like… like *her*. Like the fear that surrounds Rei in a noxious cloud. Or the choking dread that surrounded Okumura before Izuku managed to talk him down. He can see Okumura now, and Hino, still following Endeavor; there are so many ghosts here, and they're the only ones not frozen by the Hero Killer's boiling hate.

Stain feels like a poltergeist.

But he's alive and breathing, and there are little differences that Izuku can barely register with his heart pounding the way it does. Sachi was scared and sad and panicking, hiding behind her anger and screaming at anyone who came near. Okumura was wild and blind with vengeance, lashing out at the object of his hatred and anyone close enough to catch the splashback.

And Rei…

Well.

Rei is just *Rei*.

But Stain's is focused. There's intent behind it. And it has nothing to do with power, and everything to do with Stain, the Hero Killer, the man.

The man falls unconscious on his feet, eyes blank, mouth open with bared teeth.

Izuku looks across, and finds everyone there—from Iida and Todoroki to Gran Torino to Endeavor himself—frozen in shock. Petrified.

And as far as Izuku can tell, Stain didn't need a drop of anyone's blood to do it.

They end up in the same hospital room together, set to spend the night under observation. Besides his cuts, Izuku's arm has a hairline fracture from the last punch. His leg is messed up, too, though he's at a loss to remember when or how that happened. He must have been pretty hopped up on adrenaline not to notice.

And it's only then, when the nurses finally leave them be and Todoroki and Iida are *safe* and *alive* and *treated* and it's over, it's all over and they're okay and *everything is okay, no new ghosts were made, Stain is gone, Iida is safe—*

That's when it comes at last.

He's been holding out this long on fumes and a prayer, staving it off with every distracting thought he can muster, cudgeling his brain in line, but it was only ever temporary. It was only ever a delay.

And now the walls are closing in, close close *too close, too small not enough space, not enough air*, and the nurses are gone but he still isn't alone, *he needs to be alone*

"Midoriya? Are you all right?"

He's not sure which of them says that, but either way it's what finally tips the balance out of his favor.

"Bathroom," is all he says before he limps out of the room, and he really hopes there's actually a bathroom nearby, or else he's going to do this in the middle of the hospital hallway.

A cold hand closes gently on his shoulder, but before Izuku can panic, the hand squeezes lightly and steers him onward, past the few nurses patrolling the hallway this late, through a door, and into a quiet, blessedly empty restroom. It's a single toilet, not stalls, and Izuku almost sobs with relief as he turns the lock behind him. He finds the corner furthest from the door, sets his back to it, and *drowns*.

The storm comes howling in, cold and relentless as it chases the breath from his lungs and strangles him like a noose he can't break, a knot that won't loosen. The back of his head hits the wall tiles, his vision goes hazy and dark, and he falls down, down, down, so far down he isn't sure he can find his way back up.

It was so close. He came so close. A few seconds slower and Iida would be dead. He called for help, and Todoroki came running, and Todoroki nearly died *he nearly got Todoroki killed and Iida killed and*

himself killed and everyone killed

How many chances did Stain have to kill them

How many did he ignore

They could have died

And Stain didn't even want them dead enough to actually try.

Cold hands find his face, grounding him.

"Breathe, Midoriya. Can you see me?"

Blank white eyes *Iida's face with white eyes*

"No. I'm not Tenya. Tenya's in the other room. Remember? You're at the hospital."

Tensei. Tensei's here. Tensei's not with Iida what if what if what if

"Nothing's going to happen." Tensei's pale face breaks through the tunnel vision. "Do you hear me? I'm here because I know Tenya's safe. He's alive. And that's because of *you*, Midoriya."

Izuku forces his breathing to slow. He counts on each breath a little too fast, but it still helps to take in each one as slowly as he can manage, hold it as long as he can bear, let it out as steadily as his shuddering chest will allow, and repeat until he feels a little less like he's drowning in good air.

"You did *amazing*." Tensei's voice grounds him. "I'm sorry I had to put that on you. I'm sorry I didn't think to warn you sooner. You shouldn't have had to do that, but you did, and you saved my little brother. Okay? You saved him. I thought he was going to join me, but he didn't. He is alive in that room because of what you did." Tears drip from his blank eyes. "*Thank you*, Midoriya. Thank you for my brother's life. Thank you for being his friend."

Izuku, not trusting himself to speak, only nods.

"Midoriya, are you all right?" Tenya asks. There's a look in his friend's eyes (are they friends, still? At this point he isn't sure) that he can't name, and before he can attempt to make sense of it, Midoriya is out the door without a word or a glance in his direction.

Tenya's heart breaks a little more.

It's his own fault. He could have prevented this himself. But no—he'd let himself be blinded. He'd been stupid.

What would Tensei think of him now?

I need you to not talk to me for a while.

He deserves that. He deserves so much more than that. Midoriya has every right to be angry; he almost died because of Tenya's mess, and now…

His eyes are fixed on the door as he addresses the only other person in the room. "Do you…" It's pathetic, really, after Todoroki already told him to pull himself together. "Do you think he'll ever forgive me?" he asks.

There's a moment of silence.

"…What?" There's honest confusion in Todoroki's voice, and it makes Tenya wince.

"Midoriya, I mean," he says. "After all this… I just don't know anymore." When Todoroki doesn't answer, Tenya's eyes switch to the floor. "Do you remember what he told me, about… about doing something useful? Helping someone, to cope with my loss? I… I took that, and twisted it. Willfully so. I knew very well what he meant by it, but I took it and pretended it meant something else and—and used it to justify…" His voice catches. "And because of that—because of *me* —he was almost killed. You were almost killed."

"I knew what I was probably getting into, when I answered that message," Todoroki says.

"Yes but—it shouldn't have happened." His eyes burn and his head aches, but luckily he doesn't cry again.

"It did. Don't do it again." Todoroki's words come out blunt, over-simple.

"But is that enough?" Tenya hangs his head, tucking his chin in so that his hair falls over his eyes, just in case he does cry after all. "Is *learning from my mistake* enough to make up for the fact that I almost got him killed? I just—I don't know. And that's why I'm asking…"

“I’m just confused by your question,” Todoroki says at length. “Maybe you know better than I do, since I haven’t known him as long as you have. I didn’t realize he needed to forgive you.”

“*I almost got him—*”

“Killed, yeah, you mentioned that.” Todoroki shifts into a more comfortable sitting position. “I mean, that’s bad, obviously, I just don’t… think that’s really a problem for him.”

“You saw how angry he is with me,” Tenya whispers.

“Yes? He’s been angry with me before, too.” Todoroki shrugs. “Just because he’s angry doesn’t mean forgiveness is an issue.”

“In your case, maybe not,” Tenya replies, shaking his head. “Whatever your quarrel was, at least he didn’t nearly die because of it.”

“Which match were *you* watching?”

“Todoroki,” Tenya growls, just a little.

“Your problem is you’ve got it backwards anyway,” Todoroki says, matter-of-factly.

At last, Tenya lifts his head. “Backwards?”

Todoroki is looking at him like Tenya’s a particularly special brand of dense. “He’s not angry with you because he nearly died, Iida,” he says. “He’s angry because *you* nearly died.”

Before Tenya can string together a response, the door to their room opens again, and Midoriya stumbles in looking like the emotional equivalent of being hit by a train. The door swings shut behind him, and he keeps walking straight for Tenya.

“M-Midoriya, are you all—” Alarmed, Tenya almost rises to meet him, but Midoriya doesn’t seem to hear him. He neither stops nor slows until he reaches Tenya and—

He’s not as careful about it as he probably should be, but Tenya’s not in a position to complain about anything Midoriya Izuku does. Before Tenya knows what’s happening, there are arms around his neck and he’s being yanked into a hug so tight he can feel Midoriya shake.

“M-Midoriya?”

“I don’t know whether or not I should punch you in the face. I’m still deciding. It’ll be my left hand if that helps any because I’m not left handed so maybe I won’t break anything. On you *or* me.”

“Um—”

“It didn’t have to be me.” Midoriya is muffled against Tenya’s shoulder, and he shows no sign of letting go. “It could’ve been anyone at all, or me, but it didn’t have to be me, and why didn’t you just talk to someone, Iida?” To Tenya’s alarm, he hears his friend sniffle. “That wasn’t what I meant when I said *helpful* and you know it wasn’t what I meant and I’m sorry about your brother but I’m *really mad at you,* okay?” His shoulder feels damp now. “I thought you were dead. I thought I was going to find you dead because I’m slow and I didn’t know where you were until it was maybe too late and *I thought you were dead.*”

Tenya opens his mouth to answer, but he can’t think of anything to say.

“I’m happy you’re alive.” Midoriya’s voice breaks. “I’m happy we’re all alive and I’m mad at you for making me think we maybe wouldn’t be so don’t do that again. Don’t ever, ever do that again.”

“I won’t,” Tenya blurts, and he wishes he could hug back, but his arms are a little out of commission at the moment, so he settles for leaning forward. “I promise. I’m sorry, Midoriya.” He looks over Midoriya’s shoulder to where Todoroki still sits. His classmate gives him a shrug and a knowing look, and goes back to staring at his phone.

Before long, Midoriya composes himself, and returns to his own cot to retrieve his phone. After a moment of fussing with it, rubbing at his tearstained face, and clearing his throat, he glances at Todoroki.

“I don’t need a hug,” Todoroki says.

“Wasn’t going to. Just… thanks.” Midoriya won’t look him in the eye. “For showing up. I thought I’d get more people to come, but… I guess not.”

“I was close by,” Todoroki replies. “My old man’s been combing Hosu for a week now, hoping to trip over the Hero Killer.”

“Got his wish, I guess,” Midoriya mutters. “Still… thanks for coming.”

“Yeah.” Even from a distance, Tenya sees Todoroki shudder a little

before composing himself. “I did tell you, didn’t I?”

Midoriya blinks at him. “Tell me what?”

“My choice for the week. It took me right where I needed to be.”

The words mean next to nothing to Tenya, but judging by the way Midoriya’s eyes widen, they must mean something to him. For a moment, Tenya feels a little alone, like the other two are sharing something that has nothing to do with him.

He sits back and turns his eyes upward to the ceiling. He’s relieved, of course—that they’re alive, that they’re mostly all right, and that Midoriya doesn’t hate him for the stupid stunt he pulled today. Stain is in custody, Hosu is safe again, but…

Tensei is still gone. Still just as dead as he ever was. If Stain had escaped, Tensei would still be dead. If Stain had been killed, Tensei would still be dead, his memory still an open wound.

He almost got two of his classmates killed doing something that never would have made a drop of difference either way.

What would he think of me now?

They have visitors in the morning. Izuku doesn’t mind too much about getting chewed out by Gran Torino again, and Iida has returned to the calm, collected moroseness that he’s been showing all week. It still hurts to see him like this. Even if the fight is over and they’re all okay, it doesn’t change the fact that someone he loved very much is still very dead. The fact that Tensei himself has hardly left Iida’s side since the previous night doesn’t help.

It’s when Chief Tsurugamae of the Hosu police department steps in that the three of them get a little nervous.

Right—turns out there are consequences to beating the absolute hell out of a villain when you don’t actually have a hero license.

“Are you saying we should have let everyone die?” Izuku almost jumps at Todoroki’s sudden show of temper. His friend is on his feet, shaking with anger. “Because that’s what would have happened if any of us had ‘followed the rules’!”

“Todoroki,” Izuku mutters.

Todoroki ignores him. “Isn’t *saving lives* more important than—”

“Wait, Todoroki, he has a point,” Iida breaks in, trying to pacify him.

“Let him finish,” Gran Torino says. Todoroki scowls, but reluctantly falls silent again.

The dog-headed police chief clears his throat. “Right. As I was saying, that was simply what I had to say as a member of the police. However, at the end of the day, we can only really punish you for what is on the official record.” Izuku gapes at him. “Now, of course you would receive praise and admiration if this were to go public, but in order to maintain legality, it would also necessitate punishment. On the other paw, there were few witnesses to any legal wrongdoing on your part. It could be concluded from the Hero Killer’s burn wounds that Endeavor was the one who brought him down. And I doubt any hero would turn his nose up at that sort of feather in his cap.”

Izuku looks to Todoroki instinctively, but his friend’s face gives nothing away.

“Of course, that means that no one can know of your actions yesterday,” Tsurugamae continues. “The choice is ultimately yours. Personally, I think you pups have a promising road ahead of you, and I would hate to see you leashed for such an impressive ‘misstep’.”

Izuku glances over to his friends, and finds Iida looking sheepishly relieved, and Todoroki… doesn’t look happy, but he doesn’t look *un*happy either.

“It may seem unfair,” Tsurugamae continues. “I know it must be a bitter pill for you to swallow, after you suffered injuries from this whole affair.”

For an absurd moment, Izuku almost wants to laugh out loud. “Chief Tsurugamae,” he says. “I went into that alley thinking I was going to find my friend’s corpse.”

There’s an abrupt shift in the mood of the room as all pairs of eyes turn to him. “Um, Midoriya,” Iida says.

“Then I thought *I* was going to be a corpse,” Izuku continues, ignoring him. “And then Todoroki showed up by himself and I thought hey, that makes corpse number three.”

“Thanks,” Todoroki says dryly.

And in the end, do you know how many corpses there were? Zero. Zero corpses." Izuku shrugs. "So that's why I really don't care whose name gets slapped in a headline, because either way I'm going to be… just… sitting here. Enjoying not being a corpse."

A brief, awkward silence follows. Gran Torino's forehead makes an audible smacking noise as it meets his gloved hand.

"What he said," Todoroki says.

"Well I wouldn't have put it quite *that* way, but…" Iida mutters.
"Well then." Tsurugamae's voice shakes, like he's doing his best not to laugh. "I suppose that answers that."

By midmorning the three of them are outside the hospital, in fresh clothes as they wait for supervisors, parents, or whatever else. Iida's arms are still bandaged but thankfully out of their slings thanks to one of the nurses and her healing quirk, and Todoroki and Izuku sit on either side of him as they reflect, not for the first time, on what they've just survived. Rei, bored, hops over cracks in the sidewalk.

"Congratulations to your father, I suppose," Iida sighs, with a glance at Todoroki. "He'll probably be happy with the accolades that come from this."

"Hell no," Todoroki says flatly. "He's just gonna be pissed that he's getting credit he didn't earn himself."

"Perhaps he did, indirectly, considering your involve… ment…" Iida's voice trails off at the scowl on Todoroki's face.

He falls silent, and for a while, neither of the others try to pick up the conversation.

"Thank you again, Midoriya," Iida says at length. "I know I've said it ad nauseum, but… thank you. For everything."

"Anytime," Izuku answers. "And I do… I do mean that. I got mad at you, and I'll get mad at you again if you pull anything this stupid again, but I'll still help you."

"I've been thinking about you said, about me taking my brother's name," Iida continues, more quietly. "I'm just… not sure I'm worthy of it, after all this." At his side, Tensei heaves a sigh.

"Then make yourself worthy," Izuku tells him.

“Simple as that?” There’s a joyless laugh in Iida’s voice.

“It really is.”

“*Izuku!*”

At the sound of his name, Izuku sits up straight and looks around, until his eyes light upon the figure of his mother, hurrying down the sidewalk. He rises from the bench to meet her as she reaches him, and she grasps his hand in one of hers—the other is on the strap of a canvas bag hanging on her shoulder.

“Mom—”

“Are you all right? Did you break anything?” She’s already babbling, tears welling up in her eyes. “When I got the call last night, it scared the life out of me even after you called me and told me you were alright because I *know* you always downplay these things and I thought maybe you might have—”

“*Mom.*” It takes some effort to break through. “I’m fine. I promise. Just got a little banged up, that’s all. Y-you didn’t have to come, I still have to go by my supervisor’s to grab my stuff, and… um… sorry for worrying you?”

She heaves a sigh of relief. “When we get home, you are telling me *everything.* No leaving anything out, you understand?”

“Yes, Mom.” And he means it; gag order or no gag order, she’s hearing about this one. She knows about his quirk—both of his quirks—and she’s sure as hell hearing about this.

Does he also want to brag a little? Maybe.

“You’re sure you’re all right?” she presses.

“I wasn’t alone, Mom,” he assures her.

The volume of her voice drops. “I know, but that doesn’t mean—they can’t exactly—”

“No, I mean—” He looks to the bench, and steps aside so she can have a better view. “Right, um. Mom, this is Todoroki Shouto and Iida Tenya. Guys, um, meet my mom.”

Iida is already on his feet, bowing stiffly and politely until Izuku’s mother sputters. “Oh! G-goodness, you’re injured—that’s perfectly all

right, you don't need to stand up, I just came to check on him and… Well, it's very nice to meet you! Both of you!" She gives Todoroki a cautious look, and Izuku remembers with a jolt that all she knows about Todoroki is that they basically tried to kill each other at the Sports Festival.

"It's nice to meet you as well," Todoroki replies. His eyes flicker toward Izuku, briefly. He looks uncertain.

"They're my friends," Izuku says, as emphatically as he can manage. "We sort of… got out of it together. I'll tell you more about it later, it's just… complicated."

"I see…" Her eyes soften, and she adjusts the bag on her shoulder. "Oh, by the way… this was probably silly of me, but…" She zips opens the bag, and Izuku's mouth drops open.

"Mom, seriously?" On the verge of laughter, he lifts Mika out of the bag and cradles her against his chest.

"I wasn't sure what state I'd find you in when I got here, so… I thought I'd bring her along, just in case." His mother beams. "She's missed you, this past week."

And sure enough, Mika meows at him insistently, as if she's lecturing him. Scratching her behind the ears seems to calm her down.

Calms Izuku down, too.

In fact…

"Hey, can I talk to you about something real quick?" he asks. "Not—not all that, yet, just…"

"Of course." She starts to step away, and Izuku turns back to the bench.

Iida is sitting down again, and Izuku takes the opportunity to deposit Mika into his lap. "Here hold my cat, I gotta go talk to my mom," he says, and walks off briskly before Iida has the chance to reply.

His mother keeps pace with him, nudging him lightly. "You're silly, you know that?" she says under her breath.

"It *works*."

Iida looks back and forth between his friend's retreating back and the one-eyed cat purring in his lap until his neck hurts. "Wh… what? What just…?"

Shouto turns his head away before Iida can see him grinning.

Chapter End Notes

CW: Canon-typical blood and violence, hospitals, panic attack in the aftermath.

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

MORE ART DANG YOU GUYS

Some drawings of Izuku and Rei by opticalcrown.

Awesome scene from the Stain battle from anonymous submitter "olivia"

Smiling Izuku submitted by echo-oasis

Sports Festival Izuku drawn by minkidoodles

This amazing confrontation between Izuku and Okumura by lazybasil

This drawing by willhootforchocolate has a bit of a surprise.

And finally, theflyinghamster submitted "creepyboi"

And of course, check out the TVTropes page!

Edit 12/26/17: By popular demand and my own personal desire, I have made a minor aesthetic modification to Izuku in this story; this chapter has been edited to include it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So what’s the verdict?”

Besides “Hello,” it’s the first thing Toshinori has said to Gran Torino in decades. It’s still all he can do to spit it out without tripping over his own tongue.

The first thing Gran Torino says to him in just as much time is “Where the hell did you find this kid?”

“It’s… a long story.” Toshinori cradles the phone against his ear and tries not to wince. “He didn’t look like much at first, but… he showed promise. Shows promise, I mean.”

A dry chuckle answers him. “*Promise*, that’s one way of putting it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I had to knock him around a little on the first day just to get him to use his quirk, and he got frustrated and tried to punch me in the kidneys.”

This time, Toshinori does wince. “Please tell me you didn’t make him throw up.”

“I didn’t, but I made damn sure he didn’t try it again,” Torino says dryly. “Why I asked where you found him. I know you, brat—he sure as hell didn’t learn that from you.”

“Well, he… has an eye for spotting weaknesses,” Toshinori says sheepishly. “He’s an odd one, but… driven. Determined to help, no matter the cost to himself.”

“Sounds like some I could mention.” Gran Torino goes quiet for a moment. “You hear about what happened in Hosu?”

“Hm? Oh, yes.” The jitters are fading now, and Toshinori can just about relax. “Endeavor brought down the Hero Killer. I’m glad—one of my other students lost his brother to that man.”

“That Iida Tenya kid, yeah,” Gran Torino snorts. “And don’t believe everything you hear on the news. Endeavor did jack all—your little golden boy and his friends were the ones to take him down.”

Toshinori feels his heart drop to his stomach.

“Ingenium’s little brother messed up his arms, and your boy looked half dead when I finally caught up to him,” Torino goes on. “My fault. Lost track of him.”

“He doesn’t always follow directions,” Toshinori says awkwardly.

“No kidding.” Torino heaves a sigh. “But—listen. A coordinated villain attack like this. The League of Villains and the Hero Killer, working together all buddy-buddy?”

His heart is heavy, and he nods, even though Torino has no way of seeing it. “Yes, I noticed it as well. It’s too… perfect, somehow.”

“You aren’t the only one who can shout your arrival from the rooftops, Toshinori,” Torino tells him. “Think about it—high profile villain like Stain. Skills and charisma to match. Polarizing *at best*. How many villains do you know who get their own damn merch? Then you have the League of Villains, who know how to make a bang but don’t

have much else going for ‘em. Put ‘em together, and what then?”

“They get attention,” Toshinori says. “From everyone. Heroes, civilians… other villains.”

“Man like Stain has ideals, Toshinori. People with ideals get followers. And now that it’s been established—pretty damn publicly—that Stain was with the League before he got taken down…?”

Toshinori heaves a sigh, and sinks down into the nearest chair. “So Hosu was… what? A publicity stunt?”

“Try a recruitment event.” He can almost hear Torino’s teeth grinding over the phone. “And you think a man-child like that Shigaraki can think up something like that? No. Someone’s pulling the strings.” He stops, and within that silence, Toshinori’s heart sinks further.

“You don’t mean…”

“It’s got his stink all over it,” Torino says flatly. “The one who killed Shimura. Who almost tore *you* in half.”

“He was supposed to have died,” Toshinori whispers.

“Do you think I’m wrong?”

“N-no.” Toshinori’s hand tightens on the phone. “No, it’s just…”

“Your boy hardly knows a thing,” Torino interrupts. “About you. About *her*. He had quite a few interesting questions for me, and something tells me he’ll have a few more for you.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I told him about Nana.”

Toshinori can’t keep back his sharp intake of breath.

“Don’t you *hhhh* me, brat, I didn’t tell him anything that wasn’t answering a question he asked! You should’ve been the one telling him this, not me!”

“I know,” Toshinori blurts out. “I know. I’ll… I’ll talk to him.” He rubs his forehead with his free hand. “It’s past time I told him about…”

Gran Torino’s voice is grim and quiet. “All For One.”

The work experience week ends. Izuku gathers his things and leaves Gran Torino's…

Office? Apartment?

The case with his costume is lighter than Izuku remembers it. He has to wonder if it's a psychological thing, or maybe one week of getting thrashed by a senior citizen really has done wonders on his muscles.

If nothing else, it's been an interesting week. Besides learning to properly harness his power, helping to bring down the Hero Killer, and nearly dying several times, he's also had some lovely conversations with a few of the people haunting Torino's building. The girl who slipped and drowned in the bath eighty years back knows some good dirty jokes.

To say nothing of what he now knows about Ms. Shimura.

"Any more questions, kiddo?"

Izuku jumps, and turns to stare at the tiny old man standing at the door, watching him leave. "What?"

"Can't promise you Toshinori won't chicken out," Torino says dryly. "So—any last-minute wondering you've been doing, you might as well get it fixed now."

Izuku smiles. "Thanks for all your help," he says. "I won't waste it. Promise."

Torino snorts. "Better not. I'll have your hide if I hear you do. And I *will* hear. I have my ways."

"Me too." It slips out before Izuku can think better of it. It's fine if All-Might "chickens out." He'll find what he's looking for either way. He's going to get Ms. Shimura to talk to him, or die trying.

"Hey kid!" Torino barks, before Izuku can turn to leave. "I've got one question for you!"

Izuku looks at him.

There's a note of humor on the old hero's face. "Who are you?"

It brings him back to his first day, having that question shouted in his face. Izuku frowns, confused. "I'm… I'm Midoriya Izuku," he says. "I'm kind of… not anyone, yet."

“Bull.” Torino shakes his head. “Besides, that ain’t the name I was askin’ for.”

And Izuku must be all kinds of dense, because it takes him a moment to realize what Gran Torino is asking him. “Oh! It’s—it’s Deku.” For a moment the name feels odd and awkward on his tongue, like he’s a little kid trying to curse for the first time.

“You sure about that?” Torino asks. “The way you say it makes it sound more like an insult than a name.”

Izuku shrinks a little. “It takes some getting used to,” he admits. “Because… it kind of was?” At Torino’s raised eyebrow, he shrugs. “But not anymore. It’s mine now. My name. My*hero* name. And nobody can use it to hurt me anymore.” His hand tightens on the handle of the case. “If I can take a name like that and make it mine, then I can do the same with One For All.” Finally he turns away, before he can see Torino’s reaction. “Maybe it seems stupid, but it’s still mine.”

“One more question!” Torino calls after him. “Where the hell did Toshinori find you?”

“Under a bridge!” Izuku answers, without slowing or looking back. Torino’s laughter follows him to the end of the block.

It’s quiet when Shouto gets home, and he has learned to fear the quiet when his father is at home.

When Endeavor is away, the house is safe. When Endeavor is at home and the house is noisy, then at least Shouto knows where he is and what he’s doing. Even if it’s noisy because it’s the middle of a training session and Endeavor is in his face with fire and fists, at least Shouto knows what to expect. It’s familiar, and in this house, that’s as safe as Shouto is going to get.

But now it’s quiet, and Shouto’s stomach twists and shreds itself with dread. His arm is still bandaged, with the dull ache and itch of a healing gash. In the wake of the Hosu incident, the hospital could not afford to waste healing quirks on a flesh wound. Right now, his arm is a weakness. And this house makes Shouto keenly aware of his weaknesses in a way that no other place does.

He wonders where his father is. What he’s doing. They’ve arrived separately, but Shouto knows that Endeavor arrived first. Does the old

man know he's here now, too?

Fuyumi is in the living room when Shouto walks in, and she looks up from the homework assignments she's grading. "Hey," she says, and her voice is as soft as ever. (Shouto has never heard Fuyumi shout.) "He got home ten minutes ago. He's been quiet. I can't tell what mood he's in."

Shouto nods dully.

"You okay?" His sister tilts her head, as if trying to angle herself into his line of vision. "You were right in the middle of that stuff in Hosu, huh?"

Shouto is about to reply when the floor creaks and his father steps into the room.

Todoroki Enji doesn't look at his daughter. He never does; by the way he treats her, Fuyumi is a houseguest at best and a tenant at worst. And when Shouto is in the room, he acts as if he has no older children at all. His firstborn is invisible to him, and Shouto wishes he could be so lucky.

"Damn legal system." Endeavor's voice is a growl. Shouto's stance shifts into something close to parade rest. "Hero Killer would've made a good debut, and those bastards hit us with a gag order." Flames wreathe his throat, flickering irately. "Giving me credit, as if I *need* a damn handout like that." His hard eyes bore into Shouto's. "And as for you…"

Shouto keeps his face carefully neutral.

His father moves before he has the chance to react. Shouto blinks, his teeth clack together with impact, and he finds his back pressed painfully to the wall, the back of his head tender from colliding with it. Endeavor is in his face, pinning him in place with a handful of Shouto's shirt in his fist.

"Do not *ever*—" his father snarls. "—disobey or ignore a direct command from me again. Do you understand me, Shouto?"

Over Endeavor's shoulder, Shouto can see Fuyumi rising from the couch with a look of alarm on her face.

"In the field, my word is gospel." Endeavor's eyes burn with anger. "In the future, you will *listen*. And you will do exactly as I say, when I say

it. If I say jump, then you say 'how high.' So help me, Shouto, if you *ever* run off when I give you a command again, you'll wish you'd been born *quirkless* by the time I'm done with you."

I already do, sometimes .

Fuyumi hovers in the background, wide-eyed and shaking, mouth half open as if she's trying to gather her wits to speak up. Shouto urges her silence with a sharp motion of one hand, out of his father's line of vision.

"And do you honestly think I wasn't told the details of what actually happened?" his father demands. "I'm almost glad this ended with a gag order—I would have died of shame if word got out that you stayed in the background and let two of your competitors deal the final blow. It's as if you're doing your *damnedest* to look weak and make *me* look like a fool!"

His fist digs into Shouto's chest, pressing him painfully against the wall. Ice spreads from where his right shoulder touches it, but Shouto isn't paying attention to that.

What can his father do? Not kill him, certainly—that would be counter-productive. (Stain tried to kill him, and failed.) What can Endeavor do but shout and curse, or leave bruises and minor burns that a press of ice can treat? But Shouto doesn't think of that, or of the cold rage on Endeavor's face. He doesn't think of the fist against his chest, or how easy it would be for his father to lose control and let flames touch him.

Instead, he thinks of a smile.

Shouto knows what it's like to have it pointed at him. He'd thrown down the gauntlet, and Midoriya had answered him with a smile that showed all his teeth and fell just short of reaching his eyes. It was the sort of smile that stuck with you, that left things crawling on your back long after you stopped looking at it. It kept you asking questions, wondering if its wearer knew something you didn't. Why else would someone smile like that?

But then…

Shouto knowsother things now, too, like the limb-locking paralysis of the Hero Killer's quirk, and that split-second helpless terror of seeing death approach and having no way of stopping it. But he didn't have to stop it in the end, not with Midoriya Izuku crouched over him,

eyes glinting eerily, almost *glowing* in the dimly lit alley, baring his teeth as if he was fully prepared to use them in the fight.

It turns out that smile means something very different when it's pointed at something that wants to hurt him.

Midoriya Izuku is frightening, and not in the way that Todoroki Enji is frightening. Endeavor is powerful and spiteful and angry, but his anger is ordinary and his desires are plain and transparent. Shouto knows what drives him; he knows what he's capable of and how far he'll go to get what he wants.

He doesn't know that about Midoriya. He's not sure he wants to know how far someone who smiles like that will go.

Just for an instant, Shouto imagines what it would feel like to see that smile pointed at Endeavor.

"Well?" His father's voice brings him back to the present. "Have you anything to say?"

And Shouto stares at him, numb and bewildered and *wondering* because—

"No," he says aloud, voice rasping. He can't speak his mind, not when all he can think is

My friend is scarier than you.

Izuku's shoes are barely off when his mother meets him at the entryway and catches him in a tight hug. Guilt fills him—he hadn't thought of her, hadn't thought of how she might feel, how she would *worry*—and he returns it without a word. The door behind them is shut, and their only company is Rei and Mika and maybe a couple of the other apartment ghosts—Mrs. Matsuda can be nosy sometimes. And so, with his mother's arms around him, Izuku lets the story fall from his lips. Ingenium's death and reappearance, Iida's grief, Izuku's own growing worries, all leading up to what happened in that Hosu alley.

His mother is quiet for a moment, still holding him. When at last she speaks, her voice is hushed. "You didn't go looking for… for Stain?" she says.

"I was looking for Iida." Izuku swallows painfully. "Because I—I

thought *he* might go looking for Stain, and even if he didn't, Hosu was a… a mess. I was worried about him."

"And you called for help."

"I should've done it sooner," Izuku admits. "But, when Tensei showed up, I…" His voice catches. "I *panicked*."

"I don't know anything about, about heroics," she says, her voice muffled against his shoulder. "I don't know what to do or how to do it, but Izuku, I can't think of anything you did wrong. And you were *still* in danger."

"I did my best," Izuku whispers. "A-and… and Mom?"

Finally, she pulls back. Her eyes are red from crying. "Yes?"

"I've thought about it, and… y-you know what?" In spite of the tears, Izuku manages a smile of his own. "I don't know if I would've found Iida in time, if Tensei hadn't led me to him. And later, Rei brought Todoroki to help—I don't know how she did it, but she did. So that means… I was wrong." His vision blurs. "My quirk—my old quirk, I mean. My original quirk. I guess it can help me save people after all."

"I know you can," his mother replies. "If anyone can find a way, it's you, Izuku. Just be careful. Please, whatever else happens… be careful."

"I will, Mom."

She seems to rally herself, wiping the tears away. "Good. Now—are you hungry?"

Izuku smiles. "A little bit. Just give me a second to put my stuff in my room."

Morino meets him in the hallway before he reaches his bedroom, looking happy to see him. Izuku likes Morino; she's friendly and kind, and sometimes she'll help him calm Kurosawa down when the other ghost forgets that he's dead and returns to the day that armed burglar shot him in his own home. "Oh, good, you're back! She's been waiting for you since yesterday."

"Who?" Izuku blinks owlishly at her.

"Didn't catch her name, but she says she knows you," Morino replies,

as Rei moves past them to go to Izuku's room. "Tall, black hair, looks like she could bench a guy twice her size? She seemed nice enough." Morino frowns. "Should I have chased her off, or…?"

"N-no, no it's fine…" Izuku's voice trails off, and he's already running for his bedroom. He steps inside, one hand reaching for the open door.

"Hi, kiddo." Ms. Shimura sits on his bed, hands folded in her lap. She's smiling, but her face is unreadable. "Did you have a good week?"

Izuku stares at her, speechless. He drops his things, turns, and walks back out toward the kitchen.

"Mom, I need to, um…" His thoughts are beginning to swirl, and he wrings his hands and wards off his daze. "In my room—there's someone I need to talk to."

She looks up from the stove with a look of concern on her face. "Everything all right?"

"Nothing dangerous. I just need to have a conversation and I don't know how long it'll take, sorry."

"Food won't be ready right away," she assures him. "Don't take any nonsense, now."

"Oh, I won't," he mutters.

When he returns, he closes his door behind him. Hopefully this won't end in him yelling, but at this point he can't be sure.

Silence stretches between them. Even Rei is quiet.

"So," Ms. Shimura says at last, her voice soft. "I take it from the look on your face, that… that you know a few more things—"

"Why didn't you tell me?" Izuku spits out.

Ms. Shimura falls silent, shutting her eyes. The corners of her mouth deepen.

Izuku grits his teeth, riding out the knot of hurt that rises and falls in his chest. "Why didn't you tell me you had One For All?" he asks. "You saw me, you *knew*—you knew I couldn't control it, and I was hurting myself, and I needed help, so why didn't you say anything?"

"I'm sorry, sprout—"

“I have a *name*!” Izuku bursts out, only to feel guilty instantly when she winces. “L-look. I just don’t—I don’t understand. Something this important—don’t you care? If you had One For All, and I’m its next wielder, then… shouldn’t it matter to you that I use it properly?”

“Of course it matters,” she tells him.

“Then why didn’t you say something?” he asks. “You knew I was struggling, so why—are you still mad at me for lying to All-Might? About my quirk?”

“No, that’s not it at all!” She shakes her head, and her hands tighten into fists in her lap.

“Then *why*—” He stops short, because now he just sounds like he’s whining. He grinds his teeth and forces himself to take a deep breath. When that doesn’t quite slow his temper, he runs his fingers through his hair until they catch in the tangles. “L-look, I… I’m not… you’ve helped me, okay? Teaching me how to fight. A-and I’m grateful, I really am, but…” He raises his eyes and finds Ms. Shimura looking at him with sadness in her face. “I just don’t understand why you wouldn’t tell me what you were to him. A-and maybe I should’ve guessed, m-maybe I should’ve… but…”

His voice trails off, and Ms. Shimura hangs her head so that her hair falls over her face. “Midoriya, I…”

“You said before that… that you weren’t sure I’d forgive you when I found out what you did to him,” Izuku says. “What did you mean by that? I asked Gran Torino, and he said nothing bad happened between you. What did you do to him?”

“Nothing.”

“That doesn’t even—”

“I mean *nothing*, Midoriya!” Ms. Shimura is on her feet, quite literally in the blink of an eye. “I mean I didn’t—I couldn’t—” She flickers in an out of view. “I couldn’t do anything for him—I just—”

And for the first time, Izuku truly sees her.

She’s wearing her hero costume—or at least what’s left of it. One glove is in shreds, and barely covers her left hand. The other is gone entirely, and the hand beneath it is bloody and broken. Her bodysuit is black, or it’s red, or maybe it’s scorched and bloodstained so

thoroughly that the original color can no longer be seen. The remains of a pale cape hang in soiled tatters from her shoulders, and her hair, torn from its up-do, hangs over her face in snarled clumps.

And her face…

Izuku's stomach twists itself in knots, and he tastes bile at the back of his throat. He can't see her eyes past the tangled hair, and with that much blood encrusting her hair and her face, he wonders for a moment if she even still had eyes when she died.

Shimura Nana, the seventh wielder of One For All, stands before him mangled and broken. Not ghost-pale and spectral, but dark with blood and deep bruising and grisly wounds.

Izuku can't even tell which was the one that killed her.

"Not a pretty sight, is it?" She tries to smile with a broken mouth. Izuku sees the rust-brown streaks where blood spilled past her lips.

Izuku is glad when the tears come. This isn't the way he wants to see Ms. Shimura—strong, bright, vibrant Shimura who throws nicknames around that tease but don't sting, who taught him to throw a proper punch, who loves All-Might enough to stay with him every minute of every day.

"I wish you'd told me," he whispers.

"Me too." Her voice cracks. "But I… I got selfish."

"But why?"

"I told you. You love Toshi. You love him with every inch of your heart, and… and I was so ashamed, Midoriya. I saw how much you love him, and I couldn't bring myself to tell you that I abandoned him."

Izuku blinks the wet blur from his eyes, to find tears cutting clean tracks through the blood on her face. "But—but you didn't mean to," he says. "You didn't leave him on purpose. You died."

"Does it matter? It was the same in the end. I… I took a risk that I knew was more likely to kill me than not, and—and I wasn't thinking of him when I made that choice, Midoriya." She hangs her head. "I was thinking about myself—about how it would affect me, not him. I was so willing to die for the greater good, and be brave and selfless,

and I didn't think of what I was leaving behind. I got so caught up in my responsibilities as a hero that I forgot my responsibility to raise him." She lifts her broken arms. "I died a pathetic death, and *I left him*."

"You—" Izuku starts, but she shakes her head.

"And I didn't tell you about who I used to be," she says. "Because if I did, then you would have asked for my knowledge of One For All, and I… I could never have told you no, once you knew that."

"But what's wrong with that?" Izuku presses, his voice plaintive. "Why wouldn't you want to…?"

"Because it isn't fair!" Her form flickers again, and the shreds of her cape stir as if in a breeze that Izuku can't feel. "He didn't—he didn't get to learn from me and… and I couldn't stop thinking that it wouldn't be fair to him, that *you* could but not him." She raises her head a fraction, and her hair parts from her dead white eyes. The corners of her mouth are turned upward, but her smile holds no joy. "But it wasn't fair to you, either, was it?"

Izuku watches as her smile fades, and more tears cut through the blood.

"I'm sorry, Midoriya." Her voice shakes with held-back sobs. "I am so, so sorry."

Izuku rocks back on his heels, lost. His face feels stiff with drying tears. "I…" He grinds his teeth, grasping for the right words. "I think I understand. And I'm glad that… that you did help me. When you taught me to fight."

"I got scared," Ms. Shimura tells him softly. "When your school was attacked. I could—I recognized them. Some of the other spirits that came through with them. The whole thing reeked of ***him***—" For a moment the sound of her voice drives itself into his ears like a drill bit. "You could have died. They could have killed you while you were still so young, and…" Finally, she meets his eyes. "And all I could think was that he's lost so much. *Too* much. More than anyone should have to." She lifts her bloody hand toward him, not quite reaching for him. "I couldn't let him lose you, too."

Fresh tears scald their way down Izuku's face. He can't talk through the thickness in his throat, and even if he could… what can he even say to this?

“I’ve made so many mistakes,” she says. “Dying didn’t make me any wiser. And if you can’t forgive me, I understand, but… please. Please let me keep helping you. There’s so much I need to fix.”

Izuku looks at her through his streaming eyes, at the blood and wounds and the brokenness on her face that has nothing to do with bones.

He can’t even tell which wound was the one that killed her.

If you want to ask me if I was there, then just say it, Gran Torino had said. *…I wasn’t. No one was.*

She looks like she died slowly, Izuku thinks.

She looks like she died crying.

Nana feels the brush of Midoriya’s fingers against hers, warm and alive and everything that she is not. She looks at him and finds his hair hanging over his sunken eyes, hiding them from view. His mouth is a thin, tight line, tense with anger, and after what she’s told him, she doesn’t blame him.

What must he think of her now?

But then he lifts his chin, and his dark curls part, and his tear-stained eyes burn with anger as he brushes his fingertips against her broken hand. When he speaks, his voice is cold and quiet.

“Who hurt you?”

If she still had a heartbeat, then maybe it would stutter to a halt. He is angry, not with her but *for* her; angry with someone he has never met, whose name he does not even know.

She wants to laugh. She wants to cry. She wants to pull him into a hug. Heaven help her, she doesn’t want to answer.

She wants this kind, selfless boy to stay far away from All For One. She wishes Toshi’s successor were anyone else, at the same time as she knows that he could not have made a better choice.

But she has done enough needless secret-keeping. And so, she takes his hand, lets her tears mingle with the blood on her face, and tells him.

Chapter End Notes

CW: Child abuse (verbal and physical intimidation), discussions of past death, blood and injury.

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

GET READY FOR SOME FANART

Submissions by astronautgeckos, chaosandcats, nerdy-critter, and olivia.

By cute-evil-meme-queen.

By moresquigglylines.

By biteitwhenitssoft.

By dips-go-home-ur-drunk.

By euvoi.

By teenthesmolbean.

By skyesational.

And, as always, this story has a TV Tropes page!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sometimes, in the dead of night, Izuku finds himself in familiar places.

For example, tonight he stands in the USJ and watches the Noumu crush Aizawa into the ground. It's never a question whether or not he dreams in color, because Izuku sees red in them. On Aizawa's face, on the cracked ground beneath him, smeared on the Noumu's hands—on his own hands, too. His limbs are locked in place, his chest frozen—he can't even take a breath to scream.

Aizawa falls from the Noumu's dark hand like a broken doll—and then there are two of him, and the second blinks at Izuku with blank white eyes.

His form is wavering, but solid. Pale but opaque.

Dead, not unconscious.

Shigaraki grasps Tsuyu by the face, and she screams as she falls to ash. Her ghost appears, still screaming, twisting even though she's dead and nothing can hurt her anymore. Shigaraki turns to him then, twitching fingers reaching and grasping for Izuku's eyes.

He shuts them, and opens them in the alley. There are ghosts again, and even in his dreams he can count and the numbers make sense—seventeen for the heroes he doesn't know, eighteen for Tensei, nineteen for Rei, twenty—

Iida is number twenty, standing over his own body, eyes locked wide and pleadng on Izuku's while Izuku's breath comes in short gasps because he ran and ran but he was *too slow*

Blades flash in the dark

His blood spills, his limbs lock

He calls for help. It comes out as a whisper but he calls and calls *Tensei called but nobody came, Iida called but Izuku was too slow*.

He calls again and Todoroki comes running, flames in technicolor, orange and red make the shadows dance, and Izuku still can't move, still can't scream, can only watch as Stain cuts him down and Todoroki falls just beyond his reach, eyes shut.

They open again, not gray and blue but milky white.

And he's the only one now who isn't dead, because he couldn't save them, couldn't do anything, not fight or protect or even run fast enough to stop a sword, he can't win a fight with his quirk, he can't save people, *all he can do is talk to them when they're already dead—*

He wakes up with all the abruptness of a slap in the face, tangled in damp sheets, drenched and sticky with sweat. He's already nauseous, already crying, already rolling over to gag himself with his own pillow before his hoarse sobs can wake his mother.

Cold hands pat at his head, snagging in his tangled, sweat-stiffened hair. The tears subside, and he shivers, curling in on himself in a tight ball, waiting for the crawling on his back to go away, for the shadows to back off, for the visions to leave.

It takes a moment for his eyes to focus. The clock by his bedside reads four-twenty-eight, and he struggles and kicks until the encumbering sheets are crumpled at the foot of his bed. He sits up, pajamas clinging

wetly to his skin.

He doesn't hear the pad of paws on the carpet—he only realizes Mika is there at all when she leaps into his lap and steps all over his thighs, kneading until the pricking of her claws brings him more fully into wakefulness. Izuku's eyes are still mostly shut as he reaches for her and clutches her against his chest. She wriggles in his arms, but she doesn't claw or bite or struggle free.

The light comes on, and he jumps, eyes fluttering open to look to the door. "S-sorry Mom—" he begins, but his door is barely ajar and the apartment beyond is quiet but for the usual background creaking in the walls. Rei hovers by the light switch, dark hair falling over her face. When Izuku focuses on her, her hands move.

Go back to sleep?

"N-nope," he rasps. "No. Absolutely not. Not going back there." He shuts his eyes again and shakes his head furiously, as if that will jar the memory of Aizawa-sensei's dead face from his mind.

He gets a few seconds of blissful blankness before it comes back. Faces crowd in his mind—Aizawa-sensei becomes Iida becomes Todoroki becomes Tensei becomes Sachi screaming and crying as her mangled hands clutch the wheel of her car with its cut brakes—

Tears drip down to his chin again. He wipes his eyes and reaches for his phone, without even thinking. It's automatic.

When his eyes clear again, he finds that he's opened up his text messages with Iida. He doesn't remember making that decision, but here he is.

He scrolls up, mouth twisting wryly at the long series of messages from his phone to Iida's, all marked as read but unanswered. He swipes his way back to the bottom, and finds one new message—the first text he's gotten from Iida in nearly a week.

[1:28] Iida:

You're probably asleep right now. If so, I apologize if I wake you. If not, then you really should be going to sleep, Midoriya!

[1:30] Iida:

I hope we can speak more later, but I wanted to say this as soon as possible.

[1:34] Iida:

Thank you, and I'm sorry. You deserved better from me.

Izuku's thumbs move to reply, before he thinks better of it. If this means that Iida will be back to replying within three minutes of receiving a text message, then he doesn't want to risk waking his friend up. Anything they say to each other on this subject will be better left for a face-to-face conversation.

He switches to his text conversation with Todoroki, and his mouth twists into a self-conscious smile when he's greeted with a picture of Mika with his kitschy old All-Might headband balanced on her head and being a very good sport about it. Right—he'd stayed up until nearly one in the morning, working off nervous energy by snapping stupid photos of his cat and sending them to Todoroki.

He takes a gamble then, and sends another message.

[4:36] Me:

hey so

[4:36] Me:

let me know when your injuries are better?

[4:37] Me:

once they are, we can spar again. after what happened with stain it'd be good to get in some extra practice.

He ponders those messages for a while, before deciding that there's not much more he can add. There's no icon or indication that Todoroki is replying, or even that he's read the messages, so Izuku sighs with relief. Todoroki's still asleep, and Izuku hasn't woken him.

The bed dips a little when Rei bounces onto it to sit by him. She settles into his lap, craning her neck to see the screen of his phone. The tip of her tongue pokes out of her mouth, and she makes a grab for it. Izuku barely pulls it out of her reach.

"Hey c'mon—" Rei makes grabbing motions, and in spite of the lingering nightmares, Izuku manages a smile. "Okay, okay, lemme just pick something more interesting." Rei fidgets impatiently, and he brings up his Youtube app.

Weariness pulls at him, promising punishment and regret once the day comes. But the thought of sleep makes him feel physically ill, and he's no stranger to poor rest, so he settles down with a ghost and a cat vying for the most comfortable spot in his lap, and watches Vine compilations and baby goat videos until the sun rises.

Uraraka Ochako is not stupid. Some people might look at her, take in her bright smile and her cheery disposition, maybe even overhear some of the conversations she has with Kirishima when they're both riled up and excited, and leap to the "airhead" conclusion without stopping to think. It's irritating at best, even if being underestimated can be useful once in a while.

It has nothing to do with grades, or intelligence, or how fast she can write a three-page essay on the history of quirk politics. It has everything to do with having eyes and ears and a halfway-decent memory and the ability to use those things in conjunction with one another.

For example, when she walks up to UA's front gate on the first day back from internship week, she *sees* Deku not too far ahead, walking practically cheek-to-cheek with Todoroki, of all people. As she trots a little to catch up, she gets close enough to *hear* them chatting, and even catches the last bit of whatever Todoroki is saying.

"—and you look terrible right now. Even worse than usual."

"Look me in the eye and tell me you've been sleeping like a baby after

that," Deku retorts.

"Fair enough."

And she *remembers* that the last time she saw them interacting in any way was when they may or may not have tried to kill each other at the Sports Festival. She also remembers that Todoroki does a lot of things, but she's never seen him chat with anyone, or heard him ask after anyone's well-being. He's not *mean*, per se, especially compared to Bakugou, but he's stand-offish and doesn't really talk to anyone, and he said he wasn't there to make friends in front of basically the entire class, so…

Oh, well. She's certainly not going to find anything out by standing all the way back here.

Ochako is not stupid, and neither is she shy, so she trots to catch up with an easy spring in her step and a bright "Morning, Deku!" In just a few paces she's side-by-side with Deku as he turns to look and—okay, she definitely sees what Todoroki was talking about. "Whoa, Deku, you look a little rough," she blurts, and if Iida were here then he'd definitely chide her for being tactless. But what else can she say? There are fading bruises on his face, he has a half-healed split lip, and… well. Come to think of it, she's never seen him without dark circles under his eyes, but they look even worse than usual this morning. And if he looks bad enough that even *Todoroki* is commenting on it…

"How was your week?" Deku asks.

"It was pretty cool, but c'mon, what about *your* week?" Is Deku scatterbrained because of obvious sleep deprivation, or is he purposely changing the subject? "I saw the news, Deku. *Everybody* saw the news. I mean, the *Hero Killer*?" She *could* try to ease into it, but she's been sitting on this question since they last spoke over the phone, and needless to say she's a bit impatient. It's all she can do to keep from punching the air in agitation. "You're really lucky Endeavor showed up when he did, because… because…" She can't think of a proper way to finish that sentence. "I mean, what was that even like? How did that even *happen*?"

"Uhhhh…" And Deku shoots a glance at Todoroki.

She recognizes that kind of glance. It's a solidarity glance. An I-don't-know-how-to-deal-with-this-so-I'm-looking-to-you-for-a-cue glance. It's the kind of look that passes between friends, or close allies, and not

two people who went from never talking to furiously punching each other back and forth across an arena on national television.

“Where… where was your supervisor, when it happened?” she presses. “I mean, I guess, was he okay? What was he like?”

“Very small and merciless.”

In spite of herself, Ochako sputters out a laugh. “He wasn’t too hard on you, was he? Gunhead was actually pretty cool to work under. And a lot nicer than he looks, but still…” She rolls her shoulders, and the movement reassures her. She’s never felt this physically secure in her own skin before. “Well. I really learned a lot—I hope I get the chance to show it off in class.” Inwardly she shakes herself—she’s getting off track again.

“That’s great! I… actually, I learned a lot, too.” He smiles, and it’s genuine enough to make the bags under his eyes look a little less awful. “My supervisor was… memorable. Helpful, though.”

“That’s good. But… more important than anything, are you okay?”

Something flashes in his eyes, and he glances to Todoroki again—but Todoroki’s already wandered off, so he turns back to her. “W-well… yeah, I’m fine, first off. But, um…” His voice trails off.

“Deku…” Ochako tilts her head so that her face is still within his line of vision as they enter the school building. “You do realize that not answering the question makes me want to know the answer even more, right?”

“I… well… yeah.” His shoulders slump a little.

“And that the longer you take to think of an answer, the more I’m going to think you aren’t telling the truth?”

At least he has the grace to look guilty.

Ochako sighs. “Deku, you remember what we said to Iida last week, right? If something’s wrong—”

“I-it’s not, I mean, not *now*, it’s just…”

“I know you don’t have to tell me if you really don’t want to,” she continues. “But… I am still your friend, and if something’s going on, then—”

“I *do* want to,” Deku blurts out, and there’s no hesitance or anything in how he says it. It slips out as if on its own, and she’s inclined to believe it. “I do, I just… can’t.”

“No judgments,” Ochako tells him. “Whatever it is, I’ll listen and I’ll take it to the grave. Wild horses couldn’t drag it out of me.”

“No, I—” A pained look crosses his face. “I mean I literally can’t tell you. As in, there are real, legitimate, *legal* reasons I can’t tell you.”

…Oh.

Well she wasn’t quite expecting that.

“But I *can* tell you that it’s okay, and I’m fine, and whatever it is, it’s over now,” he goes on. They’re close to the classroom.

“If you’re sure,” Ochako says reluctantly. She wasn’t expecting to get stone-walled for a reason like that.

And just like that, in spite of the exhaustion ringing his eyes, Deku slips back into his normal cheery, chattery self, and Ochako lets the rest of it slide for now. Whatever else is going on, he’s here and he’s okay, and a little bit of lost sleep is pretty tame, as possible downsides go.

Still, she finds it noteworthy that both Deku and Iida gravitate to Todoroki’s desk before class starts, as if it’s the most normal thing in the world for them to stand around him and chat about whatever. And —yeah, that sort of makes sense, since whatever went down with the Hero Killer apparently involved all three of them, but… after his little speech before the Sports Festival, she’d kind of assumed that Todoroki didn’t really *do* friendships.

Soon, though, it’s easy to get caught up in the post-internship excitement. Everyone’s come out of it with something new. Bakugou has a new haircut, of all things. From the sound of it, Jirou and Tsuyu have racked up some solid experience and training, too. Mineta looks delightfully traumatized. Ochako thinks back to her own training, the throws and maneuvers now drilled solidly into her head, and can’t help but throw herself back into that combat mindset (and throw a few jabs, as well).

The trio in the back are soon the talk of the class, though. As it turns out, she isn’t the only one with questions. The moment Deku, Iida, and Todoroki are all in the same place, their classmates are practically

mobbing them for details. Ochako winces a little when she sees it—if she'd realized that everyone would be pumping them for information, she might have eased up earlier. She looks anxiously to Deku, eyeing the sullen look on his face. He isn't putting on a cheery mask like he did with her.

"Did you guys watch that video of the Hero Killer, though?" Kaminari pipes up. "Where he was giving that speech before they took him in? I dunno what it was about him, but it was kind of badass, right? Am I the only one who thought that?"

Ochako grinds her teeth and looks to Iida. Her friend's face looks like stone.

"Not really." It's not Iida who says that—if Iida's face is stone, then the look in Deku's eyes is positively molten.

"He had that conviction, though, right?" Kaminari goes on, though the grin on his face is faltering. "Like, he's got this one-track mind about his ideas or whatever. That's—that's just my take, anyway…"

"I think…" Deku's face softens back to sullen. "I think having a message is fine, but if the only way to send it is by killing people, then you don't have anything worth saying."

"Well, yeah, but…"

"Read the room, Kaminari!" Ochako blurts out, and he finally jolts in his seat and seems to remember that Iida is there.

"O-oh, right." Kaminari looks positively mortified. "S-sorry—I'm sorry, Iida, I didn't even *think*—"

"It's all right." Iida isn't smiling, but his voice is even. "You… you aren't entirely wrong about his conviction. I can understand why someone looking from the outside would see him that way." His brow furrows, turning his cool face to steel, and for the first time in well over a week, his hand comes down swiftly in a wide arc, karate-chopping the air. "Still! Midoriya is also correct. His chosen method of following his ideals is through death and terror. That is the 'what', and in this case especially, it holds far greater weight than 'why'."

Ochako knows she isn't imagining it when Deku stands a little straighter.

"As future heroes we have a responsibility to be conscious of our

actions, and of their potential implications and consequences, regardless of the reasons behind them!" Iida continues, and there isn't an eye in the room that isn't on him. "And I intend to set an example, in that respect. Now, class is almost upon us, so everyone to your seats!"

Their classmates shuffle to comply, and Ochako feels a sort of relief settle in the room. This is a return to something approaching normalcy, after what happened to Ingenium. Ochako takes a deep breath and lets it out as a sigh of relief. Whatever went down over the past week, whatever new secrets Deku's keeping, or is forced to keep, it looks like Iida, at least, is back to his old self again.

Foundational Heroics class sees them all in their hero costumes again, gathered in one of UA's many, many outdoor training facilities, and Izuku tries not to make it obvious that he's virtually vibrating with excitement.

He'd felt clumsy, the first time he wore this costume in Gran Torino's living room. It had felt awkward and intimidating, like a little kid trying on his parents' shoes. He hadn't been used to the new design then, the new material and weight of it. It had been a far cry from the jumpsuit his mother had sewn for him with her own two hands, heavy and unfamiliar in ways he couldn't put into words.

But today, he can wear this costume and say that he's officially fought a villain in it. Or—well, he can't actually *say* that, as per their agreement with Tsurugamae, but—anyway. Not important.

What is important is All-Might, and the exercise before them. Simple enough, however All-Might dresses it up as a "rescue" exercise; it's a race through an obstacle course (albeit a complex one modeled after an urban environment) to reach a single target, while keeping damage to a minimum. It's like one-sided Capture the Flag. Point A to Point B. Izuku can recognize an assessment when he sees one; this is their chance to show off what they've learned from shadowing the pros.

It's… kind of perfect, all things considered. If there's one thing Izuku's taken from the past week, it's how to haul ass to someone in distress as fast as his five-percent control of his quirk will allow. What better way to show off Full Cowl?

And yet…

Well. There's always room for improvement. Izuku is never more

aware of that than when his mind slips back to that night and runs through the events yet again—he's lost count of how many times he's relived them. Hindsight has dulled the pride and relief, and with each slow-motion mental replay, he finds more and more mistakes. It's a lot to think about.

The fact of the matter is, Izuku's still sort of guilty of the very same thing that made him lose his temper and scream at Todoroki in front of thousands of people: he's letting his own abilities fall to the wayside, unused. His reasons for setting the ghosts aside may be different from Todoroki's reasons for refusing to use fire, but the end result is the same, and the 'what' is still more important than the 'why'.

Nineteen ghosts. There were nineteen ghosts in that alley, vengeful angry things with nothing but hatred for the man he was fighting, and he'd barely bothered to take advantage of that. For all intents and purposes, Stain had been laughably outnumbered *and* utterly unaware of the fact.

The next villain might not—*probably definitely won't*—bother playing nice or talking politics. The Hero Killer was a wake-up call; if he wants to live long enough to be a hero, then he's going to have to use what assets he has.

He's going to have to use the *allies* that he has.

There's barely enough time to throw together a strategy, and the one he lands on is dead-simple. "Rei. Could I ask a favor?" His lips barely move as he speaks, and he edges away from his nearest classmates. They'll hear him talking, but he's already well-established as a mumbler.

His friend's eyes are on him, wide and eager.

"I need an extra set of eyes, and you're fast. So just—when I start, go ahead of me. Find places to touch down. Handholds. Quick paths. Warn me about hazards." He gives her a hopeful look. "Can you do that?"

The vigorous nodding is encouraging.

As luck would have it, he's in the first group. He, Ashido, Sero, Ojiro, and Iida (sans costume, since his is undergoing repairs) line up at the edge of the building they're gathered on.

He hears whispers from his classmates.

“Midoriya’s probably at a slight disadvantage.”

“You never know,” Jirou says. “His abilities are kind of hard to nail down, you know?”

“True,” Yaoyorozu replies. “But he always injures himself when he uses them, so it’s difficult to say…”

“*Starting group, take your positions!*”

Rei vanishes from his side. She reappears not far ahead, hovering at the other side of the gap between this platform and the next. The first leap is the simplest. Beyond that is a twisting urban maze of piping, rails, walls, and rooftops—a freerunner’s dream come true.

Izuku lets out the breath he’s been holding, waits for the signal, and hopes that Rei won’t let him fall.

It might have been kinder, to give young Midoriya a few rounds to watch before having him race. The boy is excellent with analysis, after all. But he won’t always have time to sit awhile and think, especially when he’s so determined to charge into danger. Better to encourage him to think on his feet.

Behind his smile, Toshinori swallows his worries. Gran Torino is a formidable teacher, but he did only have one week to work with. He can only hope it was enough.

Well. He’s about to find out, isn’t he?

“START!”

Young Sero, predictably, snags an early lead, and—

There’s a blur of green—dark green fabric, lit up with sparks like lightning coiled around agile limbs. Midoriya shoots past Sero like an arrow from a bow, overtaking him as he bounds over rooftops and leaps from foothold to foothold.

A hush falls over the watching students, and within it, in the distance, comes a familiar voice.

“*Woohoo!*”

He's never heard that sound from his student before. It's all Toshinori can do to keep from laughing aloud.

Kirishima is the first to break the shocked silence. "Look at him go! Is that even the same quirk?"

"Man, who knew Midoriya could parkour like that?" Kaminari adds.

Surprise ripples through the rest. Kirishima and Uraraka both are positively gleeful. Bakugou looks outraged to the point of being personally offended. The rest look varying levels of shocked (though Bakugou is the only one who seems to take this new development as a bad thing). In fact, the only one who doesn't seem surprised is Todoroki—if anything, the not-smile on his face is verging on *smug*.

To all of those watching, from the students awaiting their turn to the teacher awaiting the victor at the finish line, Midoriya's reflexes seem to have improved by leaps and bounds, though his movements are a little rough. At one point he drops his face into the crook of one arm, which no doubt hinders his vision even if it's only for a moment.

"Sero's catching up," Uraraka remarks. "C'mon, Deku, you can do it!"

"It makes sense," Yaoyorozu says. "This group has the most maneuverability, but Sero's quirk is probably the best suited to this exercise. He doesn't have to touch down as often, provided he can find points to swing from, and this environment is full of them. It's much more difficult to predict a stable foothold."

"I'm sorry, is no one else gonna acknowledge that Midoriya just dabbed?" Kaminari asks.

"Wait, he did?" Kirishima says. "I thought he was sneezing or something."

"Still, look at those reflexes," Tsuyu pipes up. "Jumping's tricky if you can't see where you're going to land, but it's like he's thinking two steps ahead. It's pretty cool."

"It's pretty much neck and neck between them, at this point," Jirou says. "My money's on Sero, though."

He can feel the wind in his hair. Is this why dogs stick their heads out of car windows? It feels *fantastic*.

Izuku's stomach turns somersaults as if he's on a roller coaster of his own making. Rei stays ahead of him, scouting out a safe, stable path through the replica cityscape.

Sero's still hot on his trail, swinging like an armored monkey as he closes the distance between them. Izuku hears the whap of tape nearby, and chances a glance over his shoulder to see how close his classmate is.

It's a mistake—he misses the thick pipe that he was aiming for, foot skimming off the edge of it. He can't hold back the yell of dismay as he feels himself drop. One hand stretches upward on instinct, reaching for a handhold that isn't there.

A pair of hands catches him, cold leaking through the sleeve of his costume. Izuku finds himself promptly dragged back up, clumsily scrabbling for purchase as he's helped back onto the bar. Trembling at his near-miss, he manages to hop his way up to a wider rooftop, and looks up with a shaky grin at Rei's pale face.

"Th-thanks for the save," he whispers. Sero has pulled ahead of him, and Ojiro is catching up as well. Izuku shrugs off the rest of the jittery alarm, pulls Full Cowl back together, and charges forward again.

He makes a valiant effort, and manages to leave Ojiro behind again, but Sero reaches All-Might before he does. Disappointed, Izuku touches down on the final rooftop and stumbles to a halt to catch his breath.

Sero's laughing—not derisively, but a shaky, good-natured laugh that loosens the twisting frustration in Izuku's chest. "Damn, Midoriya," he says, sounding breathless from effort. "That was *close*. If you hadn't slipped like that, I don't think I could've caught you—oh crap, did you hit your face on the way down?"

"What?" The word is barely out when he feels a warm trickle down his upper lip and tastes salt and iron. "Oh. I guess I did. Whoops." He almost wipes his bleeding nose, but decides at the last moment that he'd rather not get blood on his new costume again.

The others reach the finish soon after—Ojiro, then Iida, and finally Ashido all touch down on the final rooftop to the sound of All-Might's booming greetings.

"You've all done well," he tells them. "Young Sero may have placed first, but I can see that all of you have made progress, both in physical

ability and the application of your quirks. Well done! Keep at it, and you'll all do well in the end-of-term exams!"

Izuku feels his stomach drop, and the glow of All-Might's praise sours as it lands on him. In all the recent flurry of events and excitement, it had slipped his mind that the term is ending and exams are only weeks away.

Iida takes one look at him and promptly flies off the handle in appropriate Iida fashion. "I turn around and you're bleeding *again*," he remarks the moment All-Might is finished speaking. "Midoriya, *how* —?"

"Slipped," Midoriya says. "Anyone have a tissue?"

As it turns out, All-Might has tissues. They're imprinted with tiny rabbit shapes. As his teacher moves closer to press one into Izuku's hands, his voice barely reaches Izuku's ears.

"Your progress in one week is remarkable, my boy," he murmurs. His back is to the others. "I almost didn't recognize you."

Izuku hides his smile by pressing the tissue to his bleeding nose.

All-Might isn't done. "When this lesson is over, come see me in the teacher's lounge," he says. "We need to talk."

For a moment, Izuku meets Ms. Shimura's eyes over All-Might's shoulder. She gives him a soft smile, glowing with quiet pride.

"It's time I told you a few things about One For All."

It's probably yet another sign of Toshinori's ill fit in the teacher role, that he would rather fight armies of villains with one hand behind his back than have this conversation.

It's his own fault, really. On two counts. He should have made this conversation happen months ago—before villains attacked the USJ, before school started, maybe even before he'd passed his quirk to young Midoriya in the first place. Maybe he should have opened with this, all those months ago when he'd first stretched out his hand and offered the boy his quirk.

He hadn't, because he hadn't thought he'd need to. And the fact that he does need to is also his fault. Had he been more thorough, then

maybe… but no.

Toshinori is afraid. He is afraid of having this conversation, because young Midoriya has formed a habit of exceeding his expectations, and today's exercise left him bursting with pride and hope, but this—

More than anything, this conversation might end up being a deal-breaker.

Dutifully, Midoriya shows up to the break room to see him, face blandly curious in a way that makes Toshinori's gut twist with guilt. He wonders what the boy expects out of this meeting.

He schools his face into a carefully blank mask. The smile is harder to fake in this form, so he doesn't try. "Lock the door behind you," he says.

Moments later, Midoriya is sitting before him, nursing the cup of tea that Toshinori offered him (tea is the least he can offer).

"To begin," he says. "I heard about what happened in Hosu. I received your message, as well. I'm sorry I wasn't near enough to help you."

Midoriya jumps. "Wh—no, that's all right! I didn't expect you to, I just—it turned out fine. It was touch and go for a while, but… it was nice, getting out of it without shattering something like I usually do." He wrings his right hand. "It's a step up from last time. And the time before that. And… all the times, pretty much."

"You've found a way to harness One For All more efficiently." This time, the smile comes more easily. "I saw how you moved today. Your control is coming along, and your reflexes are excellent."

Midoriya coughs a little and takes a sip of tea. "Right, yeah… I've been working on that," he mumbles.

"Something did occur to me, though, about Stain—he ingested some of your blood, did he not?"

"Is… is that a problem?"

"Not as such." Toshinori shakes his head. "Do you remember what I told you when I first passed One For All to you?"

Midoriya answers with an eerily accurate imitation of himself. "'**Now eat this,**'" the boy replies… and that's uncanny. Toshinori almost

chokes on his own tea.

“Not quite what I meant,” he says.

“Well that’s the part that stuck with me,” Midoriya answers.

“That was… does that take practice?”

Midoriya’s face colors slightly, and all of a sudden he seems supremely interested in his tea. “Maybe.”

“W-well, anyway, I was referring to what I said about One For All,” Toshinori continues. “And how it passes through DNA.” He pushes on before Midoriya can reply. “I wasn’t sure if you’d be worried, since Stain drank your blood. It can only be passes on intentionally. It cannot be taken forcibly or accidentally.”

“I didn’t even think of that,” Midoriya admits. “So… I guess that means I wasn’t really worried about it.”

“Good, good.” Toshinori hesitates, trying not to chew on his own tongue.

“Was that what you wanted to tell me about One For All?” Midoriya asks. His eyes are on Toshinori, wide and expectant, like he knows that the answer is no.

“No. I’m… Well, I’m sure you’ve been wondering how such a power came to be.” He can do this. He just has to ease into it. *Tell it to him like how Nana told you*. “Its origins lie in the very beginning of quirk society, when powers first began to emerge.” He glances at his student. “You’re familiar with the history, I’m sure.”

“I know that… that quirks basically threw everything into chaos for a while,” Midoriya replies hesitantly. “Back when being quirkless was the norm, and humanity started to gain these powers… people were scared, and there was a lot of social upheaval, and it sort of… I guess everything else sort of ground to a halt while people dealt with that?” He shrugs. “I read some famous quote that said we’d have reached interstellar travel by now if it hadn’t been for quirks.”

Toshinori nods. “Correct. And, unfortunately, it is in times of great upheaval that… that a certain type of person finds opportunities to gain power.” His student falls quiet, watching him. “In that time, a… there was a man who was born with a unique ability to steal the powers of those around him—take them by force, either to keep, or to

give away as he saw fit. Unfortunately, most humans he granted powers can't handle the strain of multiple quirks, and it… it destroys them, from the inside. They might still be physically healthy, but… their minds don't survive." He pauses. "Perhaps this sounds familiar to you."

"Noumu," Midoriya murmurs.

"Got it in one." Toshinori sighs. "He used this power to raise armies of mindlessly loyal henchman, or to remove threats, and before long he ended up ruling Japan's criminal underworld. At some point he must have gained a quirk that stopped him from aging, in order to prolong his own reign. I don't know his name. I doubt anyone does anymore, aside from him. He's only known by the name of his quirk—All For One." The title still tastes foul on his tongue.

Midoriya doesn't reply, aside from a slight shudder.

"But he had a younger brother—weak, frail, and seemingly quirkless—who opposed him. Eventually All For One used his power to grant him a quirk, though I don't know why. Perhaps to subjugate him as well, or out of some sense of pity or familial loyalty."

At this, Midoriya sits up straight. "A brother?"

"Yes. One who he granted a quirk that stockpiles physical power. And, unbeknownst to either of them before that point, the brother did have a quirk all along—just one that hadn't made itself known."

"An invisible quirk," Midoriya says, leaning forward.

Toshinori raises his eyebrows. "So you've heard of them."

"One of the doctors my mom talked to thought I might have one, back when I was little," the boy answers. "What was it? His original quirk, I mean."

"Simply a power that allowed itself to be passed along from person to person." Toshinori takes a deep breath. "Which I'm sure also sounds familiar. And so, the two quirks combined within him, forming—"

"One For All," Midoriya finishes in a hushed voice.

Toshinori nods. "That is the origin of this power, my boy. It was—" His voice catches. "It was born with a purpose. All For One's brother ultimately failed to stop him, and so he passed his quirk to another in

the hopes that the accumulation of strength would be enough to defeat him. And on and on it went through the generations, until… now."

Silence stretches between them, as thick as smoke. It clogs Toshinori's ears like a solid mass.

His student has gone from hushed to mute. His eyes are on Toshinori's, boring into him, searching his face as if taking a measure of his soul. They flicker toward Toshinori's side, where his work shirt covers the twisted mass of scarring.

With some effort, he continues. "My own predecessor tried to defeat him, and… failed." The word sticks in his throat, a choking pain that burns just as sharply as the day she fell. *He knows,* he reminds himself. *He knows about her. Gran Torino told him already.* "And I… I made my own attempt, which resulted in the injury that I've hidden from the public, and I *thought*—ahem." He clears his throat, because his voice almost cracked, and that won't do at all. "I thought I was successful. For years I thought he had died in our fight, but… recent events lead me to believe otherwise." Guilt roils in his belly like nausea. "And if—if he is still alive, then it is quite likely, my boy, that you will have to face him yourself one day."

And with that, it's out. There's no taking it back now. By rights he never should have kept quiet in the first place, but there's no fixing it now. There's no changing the fact that Toshinori failed his student years before he'd even met him, and now Midoriya knows about it.

The silence is deafening now. There's no clock in this room, and Toshinori wishes desperately that there were. Even a maddening tick-tick-tick of seconds would be better than the utter void of sound that follows his quiet confession.

Desperation wins out, forcing more words from his tongue. "I'm… I think I owe you an apology, my boy," Toshinori says. "You—I told you none of this, and hinted at none of this, when I first offered you my power. And if I deceived you, in any way… that was not my intention. It… it must be a lot to ask, for you to join such a deadly fight that you have no prior stake in, but at the time, I hoped he had died, and—"

"He hurt you."

Toshinori can't help it—he all but jumps when his student speaks. Is it his fault that young Midoriya shifts so abruptly from dead-silence to

noise?

“Pardon?” he manages to say.

His student won’t look at him now. His eyes are fixed upon the tea in front of him, one finger tracing lightly over the rim. “All For One,” he says, and there’s *something* in his tone, something buried deep that Toshinori can only hear if he hunts for it. “He hurt you.”

“I… believe I said that, yes,” Toshinori replies, and his side twinges.

Midoriya’s eyes flicker briefly in the direction of Toshinori’s old wound, then back down to his tea. “It’s not just that,” he continues, his tone still blank and neutral. “He took someone from you. Someone important.” Up come the eyes again, meeting Toshinori’s only for a moment. “Someone you loved.”

He’s not sure he likes where this discussion is headed. “Midoriya…”

“It’s okay,” Midoriya tells him. “It’s not something you’ve ever—you couldn’t talk about it to anyone. Right? And now it still feels wrong to try, even though by rights you should be able to.”

There is little Toshinori can think to say to that, except “Well… yes, I suppose.”

Midoriya nods. “I’m not trying to dig for more information about that. You don’t have to talk about her yet if you don’t want to. I just…” He purses his lips. “I just wanted to, um, m-make it clear, I guess? That I know. And that means he’s hurt you twice over. And… and that means I have all the reason I need. T-to want to fight him.”

He feels his heart drop to his stomach. “Midoriya,” he says, and urgency creeps into his tone. “My boy, I—I’m genuinely touched, that you would think that way, but… that can’t be your reason. That shouldn’t be your reason.” He shakes his head, because he *knows*. He remembers *he can never forget* how it felt, feeling Nana’s pain as if it were his own, wanting to scream and cry and rage against anyone and anything that had ever spared a thought toward hurting her. He remembers the pain of her loss, the rage that haunted his dreams, filling him with a sick, twisting desire for retribution. “You can’t—that’s a *mistake*, Midoriya. This isn’t about grudges, or punishment, or personal satisfaction. It is simply a duty to the world, do you understand?”

“It’s not my only reason,” Midoriya nearly whispers. “I have others.

I'm just saying that, at the end of the day, it's the only reason I *need*." He draws in his shoulders, curling in on himself as much as the situation allows. "Can… can I admit something?"

Urgency turns to concern. "Of course. Is something troubling you?" He mentally kicks himself—stupid question. After the boy's harrowing experience in Hosu, he's gone and dropped another mental bomb on him. Of *course* something is troubling him.

"W-when I… when I fought against Stain." Midoriya's fingertips are white against the cup. "I… I was scared."

"Of course you were," Toshinori says gently. "You remember what I told you, remember? All heroes feel fear."

"I-I know, but… when I was fighting him, I was scared, and it made me move faster." His hands shake. "And I was *angry*, and it made me hit harder. And…" Tears gather in the boy's eyes, and he blinks rapidly as if trying to wipe them away with his eyelids. "I-I was scared because I didn't want to watch Iida and Todoroki die, and I was angry because Stain was trying to kill them. A-and—All-Might, I *swear*, I would've fought him if it was anybody in that alley, but… but I don't know if I would've been as scared, or as angry, if it hadn't been them, and… and I don't…" Tears drip down his face. "I-I think even people who save lives for selfish reason can still be he-heroes, but I-I don't *want* to be selfish, and… Does that make me selfish?"

And Toshinori can't know what's going on in young Midoriya's head, just like he can't feel the ghost of a hand on his shoulder, or hear a whisper in the air that answers *nah, kiddo, that just makes you honest*. His student finally releases the cup from his white-knuckled hands, and Toshinori sees them fidget and wring strangely in Midoriya's lap.

So all he says, in the end, is, "At the moment, my boy, you have my permission to be selfish." Watery green eyes meet his again, wide with shock. "From the moment I met you, young Midoriya, you've been an absolute pillar of selflessness, from charging into danger for the sake of someone whom you didn't get along with, to sacrificing your own advancement for… well, the sake of someone whom you didn't get along with. It's quite inspiring, my boy, but it *must* be exhausting."

Midoriya's next sniffle sounds encouragingly close to a quiet chuckle, and he lifts his arm to wipe his eyes. "U-um. A little."

"Yes. Well." Toshinori coughs awkwardly into his sleeve. "If your version of selfishness is, 'I will fight extra-hard to protect those close

to me,' then I'd say there are worse ways to be selfish. And… you are a student still, my boy. You're *learning*. No one is born with the perfect mindset for a Symbol of Peace. It will come with time and experience and training. So please…" He tries a smile. "Learn to forgive yourself, won't you?"

After a moment of thought, his student manages a shaky little grin in return. "I'll… I'll try."

"Good." Toshinori takes a sip of tea, and finds his eyes drawn back to his student's hands. They're scarred and battered, even more so than after the Sports Festival. Many of those new marks and bruises will fade and heal, but it's still a stark reminder of how much his charge punishes his hands. As Toshinori watches, he sees them move and fidget again, and a moment later he realizes why it's so mesmerizing to him.

"Oh—is… is that sign language, my boy?"

Midoriya jolts in his seat, eyes wide. "W-what? O-oh. Right. Y-yes. Sorry, it's a nervous tic."

He looks so sheepish that Toshinori can't help but smile. "Still muttering, then?" he says. "With your hands instead of your mouth?"

"S-something like that, yeah." Midoriya shifts in his seat. "Turns out people won't tell you to be quiet if you talk to yourself with just your hands."

"I see…" Toshinori frowns at his students hand's, and then his own. "Hm. I might try learning, myself."

"R-really?"

"It seems like a useful skill," Toshinori says with a shrug. "Besides… you and I have quite a few secrets shared between us, don't we? I see no downside to being able to communicate discreetly."

"Th-that's true." Midoriya takes his cup and drinks from it again, holding it in both hands as if to make sure they keep still. After a moment, now dry-eyed, he looks up again. "A-actually, I had sort of an idea…"

"Do tell."

"Well… if you start of learning, um, numbers, and words for time…

like minutes, and hours… then, in class, if you're in your hero form and you're running out of time… you could let me know? I could maybe, I don't know, cover for you or something." He shrugs. "Just a thought."

A slow smile spreads across Toshinori's face again. "It's a good one," he says. "Well. I believe I have a trip to the library in my future. But, out of curiosity… how *do* you say minutes or hours?"

Midoriya brightens at the question, and Toshinori can only smile wider as his student leaps at the chance to teach.

Chapter End Notes

CW: nightmares, nosebleed.

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Fanart links have been added to previous chapters, but here, have some more!

By flat-san.

By cricket-milk.

By cosmic-pindrops.

By illusionarypandemonium.

By myvividdreams.

By alwaysccold.

By majrilys.

And, as always, this story has a TV Tropes page!

The world is upside-down for the briefest of moments, and then Izuku lands flat on his back in the grass. He's gotten better at this—landing, that is—and manages to avoid having the wind punched out of him like it was the first few times Todoroki knocked his feet out from under him. Besides avoiding serious and unnecessary injury, Todoroki doesn't really do gentle when it comes to sparring.

Not that that's a bad thing—their wounds from Hosu are scars and memories now, and neither of them need or want to be handled with kid gloves. That's not what this is about.

He tips his head back, and finds Todoroki's upside-down face watching him with minimal concern; they've sparred enough by now to figure out each other's limits, and a fairly smooth landing on soft grass falls well short of Izuku's.

"Show me that again?" Izuku says, even as he mentally runs through the maneuver. He didn't have a good view of Todoroki's footwork, but whatever it was, it was deft enough to flip Izuku like an omelette. He sits up, batting bits of grass from his hair, and rolls his shoulders as he

gets back to his feet.

They're shy of evenly matched, when they fight without quirks. Izuku can hold his own well enough, and what he lacks in training and experience, he makes up for with raw strength, quick thinking, and the odd underhanded move. Todoroki still has more wins than he does, but Izuku hoards his victories jealously.

It takes two more tries for Izuku to figure out exactly what Todoroki's move is, and a third try to effectively counter it. That time, Izuku avoids the grab and twist, and wastes no time in counterattacking with a simple but effective throw Ms. Shimura once taught him. He hears a grunt of alarm as Todoroki feels himself going off-balance, and Izuku sends him tumbling to the grass before he can correct himself. By the time Todoroki catches his breath and sits up, Izuku's already diving for the notebook he left by their jackets and water bottles.

"That didn't take long," Todoroki remarks. "Toss me my water?"

Izuku does so. "Could've been faster," he replies, splitting his brain between the words coming out of his mouth and those coming out of his pen. "Certainly can't ask a villain to stop a fight to show me a move again. Thanks, by the way."

"It's good practice." Todoroki caps his bottle. "Helps to be able to demonstrate it to someone, instead of just going through the motions on my own, or…" He hesitates, and doesn't finish the thought. "I remember things better. Work out what I'm doing wrong. And it's…" His voice trails off.

Rei catches Izuku's eye, signing something with a wide grin when he looks up from his notebook. Izuku cracks a smile of his own.

"It's okay, Todoroki, you can say it's more fun this way. I won't judge."

His friend looks at him sharply. "It's *training*. It's not supposed to be fun."

Izuku thinks back to all the little jokes that Ms. Shimura has cracked with him (or at his expense) while showing him how to escape a headlock or throw a punch without spraining his wrist. He remembers Uraraka victory-dancing after completing a rescue exercise in class, and Iida going needlessly over the top when role-playing a victim, and Ashido shrieking with laughter somewhere behind him when she heard him whooping as he bounded through the obstacle course with

Full Cowl.

“Can’t relate,” he says.

“I’m not surprised.” It’s almost a scoff. “You turn everything into a joke.”

There’s something in his tone—something flat, almost disparaging—that makes Izuku bristle in spite of himself. “What of it?” he asks sharply.

“You don’t think that might be a bad habit?” Todoroki turns to him, as calm and unruffled as ever. “You may be strong, but that doesn’t mean you should be wasting time making snide remarks when you’re fighting villains.” He turns back to his bottle, swishing the water inside it absently. “I’d think you of all people would take this seriously.”

Izuku purses his lips to keep from scowling, because their lives have been vastly different up to now and it’s not his fault or Todoroki’s but Todoroki *doesn’t get it*. “You think I don’t take things seriously just because I run my mouth sometimes? Just because I try to stop and be happy with what I’m doing once in a while?”

“It’s not just once in a while,” Todoroki points out. “You might’ve caught up to Sero faster in that rescue race if you hadn’t wasted energy messing around.”

“Pff.” Izuku rolls his eyes. “If I can’t have fun pulling sweet flips, then what is even the point of having superpowers?”

“You’re doing it again.”

“I’m *not*—” Izuku stops, frustrated. “Look. It’s—you're not getting it.”

“Enlighten me, then.”

“It’s just…” He hesitates again, wracking his brain for the right words to get the thoughts and feelings out of his head. “It’s not a distraction, first of all. If anything, it makes me focus more.”

Todoroki looks skeptical.

“So far I’ve been in mortal danger twice.” He stops. The slime villain—it feels like a lifetime ago. “Three times. No—four. Don’t ask. And every single time, I’ve been on the verge of panic. It’s like a wave

coming in. And I'm in—I'm in the shallows, I guess, and I can feel it coming, and I know when it gets to me, I'll start drowning and I'll be no use to anyone then. So I—I crack a joke. Or I make a stupid comment. I find something—something funny. Or I find something not-funny, and make it funnier in my head. And when I do that, the wave takes that much longer to get to me. The more I do it, the longer I can… keep my head above water, I guess. Sorry, that analogy got away from me." He plucks a blade of grass, and spins it between his fingers. "I can't stop it from reaching me, but I can push it back and push it back until I do what needs to be done. And maybe if I do it out loud, I can keep other people from drowning too." Dropping the blade, he shrugs. "I mean. You sort of did it, back then."

Todoroki tilts his head. "Back when?"

"Before we started fighting Stain. I said we couldn't win, and you said we could at least make it look cool. I dunno, it made me laugh. For two seconds I stopped thinking about how likely it was that we were gonna die."

Todoroki is quiet for a moment. "I guess that makes sense."

"It's not always like that," Izuku admits with a shrug. "Sometimes I just lose my temper and mouth off. Still serves a purpose. Keeps villains talking, or… maybe if I make them mad enough, they'll go after me instead of anyone else."

"Hm." Todoroki sets aside his water bottle and gets back to his feet. "In that case, you need more practice. You're no use to anyone if a villain kills you for giving them lip."

"True." Izuku takes a quick swig of water and follows him up.

They're an hour and a half into their training get-together when Izuku starts to flag a little. It's not that he's tired (he's on his second wind, with enough breath in him to carry on a conversation while he fights) but he's vaguely troubled, or at least distracted.

"Something wrong?" Todoroki asks—in the middle of fighting him.

"Not really. Just—what you said about bad habits." Izuku feints a jab at his head, but Todoroki doesn't take the bait. "Something Gran Torino told me—" Todoroki throws a kick, Izuku intercepts and tries to throw him off balance, but Todoroki twists free and falls back into his steady stance. "—when I was interning with him, was that you risk forming weird habits if you—" Izuku makes the first move, and lands

a solid hit on Todoroki's midriff that sends him staggering back. He continues the onslaught, but it's too reckless; Todoroki gets a solid hold on him and kicks his foremost foot out from under him. Time seems to slow as he feels himself fall—Izuku grabs onto Todoroki and twists, taking him down with him. "—only spar against one person," he finishes, slightly winded.

"School training probably makes up for that," Todoroki says, disentangling himself to stand again. "Once more?"

Izuku nods, and waits for him to attack. This time, Todoroki gets a good grip on him. The fight is moving a bit too fast for Izuku's coherent thoughts to keep up, but there's something instinctual about his distribution of balance and the shifting of Todoroki's weight that makes him think, *I'm going to fall if I don't do something.*

"Something" ends up being lashing out with his single free hand. It's a controlled jab, which is probably a good thing because he hits Todoroki right in the throat. His friend makes a strangled noise and hesitates, his grip loosening, allowing Midoriya to slip free and overbalance him—gently.

"You okay?" he asks the moment Todoroki's back touches the ground. "Did I—I didn't hit you too hard, did I?"

"Wasn't expecting that," Todoroki wheezes, rubbing the spot where Izuku hit him. "Not very sporting."

Relieved, Izuku lets some of the tension from his shoulders. "Since when I have I ever been sporting?"

"Good point." Todoroki sits up with a grunt of effort. "You fight dirty."

"I fight *smart.*" Midoriya grins and offers him a hand. "If you're the hand-crusher, I can be the throat-puncher."

"Fair enough." Todoroki takes his hand, then yanks him forward, plants one foot on Izuku's chest, and uses it to flip him ass over head into the grass.

"So has anyone heard what the final practical exams actually are?" Ochako asks.

They're fairly early for first period—not Iida early, but respectable.

She'd run into Deku just outside the gate, and before long Todoroki had ended up unobtrusively slipping in beside them. It's taking a little getting used to, having Todoroki join them so often—especially since his fight with Deku got so intense. She still has no idea what that was about, and neither of them seem to be in any hurry to enlighten her.

Oh well. Not like it's any of her business.

"I heard something about giant robots, I guess?" Deku says, though he doesn't sound quite convinced. "I dunno, after everything that's happened, I'm not sure if a repeat of the entrance exam is the way they're gonna go. Especially after everyone pretty much rolled right over those zero-pointers at the Sports Festival."

"Personally, I'm not convinced of anything until there's an actual announcement," Todoroki says flatly. "I wouldn't put it past them to keep it under wraps and let rumors spread before they catch us off guard."

"Hmph." Ochako pouts. "At least we get study guides for the academic exams."

"It's practical, in the long run," Todoroki points out. "Heroes get caught in unfamiliar and unexpected situations all the time. Makes sense that exams would replicate it. Besides—I hear Principal Nedzu likes playing tricks."

"Logical ruses," Deku says with a gloomy sigh. "Any more logical ruses and I might as well just question reality all the time. Are we really eating lunch for an hour every day, or is it a mass hallucination? Does homework exist? Maybe everything's made up and our grades don't even matter."

Ochako groans loudly. "Ugh, Deku, *no*, it's too early for an existential crisis."

"It's never too early for an existential crisis," Todoroki says solemnly, and Ochako's surprised enough to laugh.

On their way to homeroom, Deku waxes lyrical about some new up-and-coming hero he saw on the news, and Ochako catches sight of Aizawa-sensei and Present Mic off to the side, standing by a closed door to one of UA's many school storage rooms. Ochako can count on one hand the number of times she's seen Aizawa-sensei before the start of class; she's always just assumed that he naps in the teacher's lounge until the warning bell. But here he is, as scruffy and sleepy as

ever, while Present Mic chats with him about something she's not close enough to hear.

As they wander closer to their two teachers, Ochako wonders at the fact that such wildly different people can end up as close as the two of them seem to be. Aizawa-sensei is always so stiff and serious underneath that lazy facade, the most dour and humorless person Ochako has ever met. And yet he's friends with Present Mic, of all people. And they *are* friends; she can tell. Aizawa-sensei isn't just pretending to put with him, or anything. He never tries to match Present Mic's… well… everything, but he looks perfectly comfortable to stand near him and absorb all the excitement and smiles, like an emotion black hole.

Ochako finds her gaze drawn toward Deku and Todoroki, right when Deku punches the air for some reason to punctuate what he's saying, and Todoroki, blank-faced, nods like it's the most natural thing in the world.

…Huh.

The three of them pass close enough to catch what Aizawa-sensei and Mic-sensei are saying. "—and it's got to be here somewhere," she hears Present Mic mutter.

"You forgot the key," Aizawa-sensei says flatly.

"I was in a *rush*," Present Mic answers, methodically patting through each and every pocket on his costume. "I got called in an hour ago to help deal with a criminal who's been on my radar, and I didn't have time to double-check—"

"You pulled an All-Might."

"It's not my fault supply closets require actual *keys* instead of a sensible keycard swipe like the rest of this place!"

"Uraraka?" Deku taps her on the shoulder, bringing her attention back to him. "Could I borrow a bobby pin?"

She's only half listening as she digs into her pocket. "Hm? Oh. Sure, Deku, I always have extras."

He takes it. "Thanks. Um—I should specify, I know I said 'borrow', but you might not get this back."

“It’s no big deal,” she assures him. “Those things come in packs of like, five hundred.”

“Thanks,” he says, and breaks away from the two of them.

“Deku, where are you—?”

Aizawa knows that this is going to be a Day. This is how it always starts—simple, as simple as one of the shelter cats horking on the carpet or Yamada forgetting his damn keys. It starts simple, but it starts *early*, and Aizawa functions on too little sleep on the best of days. He’s not in the mood for a Day.

“We’re wasting time,” he says. “Kayama should be here by now, and we can borrow hers for—” He’s distracted from finishing his sentence when Midoriya quietly nudges his way between them and steps up to the locked supply room door.

“Midoriya, what—” Yamada begins, before the boy slides a bobby pin into the keyhole.

It takes less time than it would have for Yamada to search the rest of his pockets. It’s quick, efficient, and practiced. The lock clicks, and Midoriya twists the handle and tugs it open a few inches, more to test the door than actually open it.

“Excuse me,” he says, quiet and polite as anything, and walks back to where Uraraka and Todoroki are waiting for him. Uraraka is looking at him like he just grew a second head. Aizawa doesn’t blame her.

“Shouta,” Yamada says as the kids move off. “I’ll ask again, what are you teaching those kids?”

“It’s a useful skill,” he answers. “Besides, I didn’t teach him anything. That one *came* like that.”

Midoriya is an odd one—he knows that much. There’s something about him that Aizawa can’t put a finger on—and the frustrating thing is that Aizawa knows, with zero evidence and every fiber of his being, that he should be able to. It’s not some nebulous feeling; there’s something very concrete about Midoriya that he should know but *doesn’t*—

“Well, this saves us a trip to the teacher’s lounge,” Yamada says, breaking him out of his thoughts. “And we can thank your student’s

tragic criminal past, I guess."

This is still going to be a Day. He can feel it.

"Did you know he could do that?" Ochako asks, the moment Deku has moved to his desk and out of earshot.

Todoroki shrugs. "You've known him longer than I have."

It's simple enough to put her friend's previously unknown skills out of her mind. They're doing combat training today, and that's enough to leave her vibrating with excitement. The class pairs off by random assignment for sparring practice—Ashido gets a stroke of bad luck and ends up with Mineta. Ochako isn't close enough to hear what he says, but Aizawa-sensei is, and he promptly has him switch partners with Shouji. Mineta bursts into tears when he finds himself assigned to spar with Bakugou.

Ochako's luck is comparatively top-tier, and she and Deku grin at each other across the mat before Aizawa-sensei has them begin.

Less than two minutes later, he crashes into the ceiling.

"Sorry!" Ochako calls up. "I tried to catch you, but—"

"It's fine!" Deku yells back down to her. Some of their classmates are starting to stare. She can hear Kaminari laughing. "It's fine, it's my own fault—just—" His quirk manifests in that green lightning she'd seen before, on the screen during the rescue race exercise. He kicks off of the ceiling, powerfully enough to bring him within reach. Ochako stretches to her toes and hops up to reach his outstretched hand with all five fingers, then darts out of the way when he lands. He sticks it, though, and it looks reasonably cool. Or it would, if he weren't already muttering something to himself.

"Want to try that again?" she asks.

"Yeah. I've got it this time."

And he does have it, if Ochako is any judge, because from then on he's a lot smarter about keeping her from grabbing him. Sparring with Deku is a lot different from fighting with Bakugou; she doubts he'll be bringing out those limb-shattering attacks anymore now that he has a much safer and more efficient way to use his quirk. (Of course, this is also a much more controlled environment than the Sports Festival

was, and Ochako doubts Aizawa-sensei will be as slow to step in as Cementoss and Midnight were if things get too rough.) Either way, Deku can't drive her back and keep her at a distance with long-range attacks. Unlike Bakugou, who kept blasting her back every time she tried to get close, Deku settles for being slippery and quick when she does. It's almost infuriating, how quick he is. Ochako's back hits the mat twice before she manages to use her quirk on him again.

This time, he snags her arm before he can float all the way up to the ceiling. Dangling in the wrong direction, he flashes her a bright smile. "High-five me?"

"Only if it means I won," she retorts. Instead of answering, he pulls her arm for leverage and reaches for her hand. With a yelp, she realizes what he's doing and curls her fingers into a fist. Undeterred, he clings to her wrist and tries to pry them loose. "*Deku!*"

"It's not over until I'm on the ceiling!" He's almost laughing—oh, *that* does it. Ochako digs into her week of training with Gunhead and struggles with him, fighting to twist free, but he keeps catching her and going for her hands again.

Finally, he gets a hold of her wrist, and she slips up and grabs him back with all five fingers. Deku yelps as gravity returns to him and tries to correct himself, but all this accomplishes is making him land perpendicular to her rather than in a more compromising position.

Not that that stops Mineta from howling with utter glee, before Bakugou blasts him halfway across the room. If someone had told Ochako before now that she would ever feel genuinely grateful to Bakugou for something, she would have rolled her eyes.

Sero and Iida are close enough to see it, and they actually have to pause their spar because Sero is laughing too hard to put up a proper defense, and then Iida is too busy scolding him for it to put up a proper offense.

"—highly disrespectful and unprofessional! Sero—Sero please, we mustn't waste time better spent training!" Sero's almost crying.

Aizawa-sensei strolls up as Deku apologizes profusely and Ochako climbs to her feet, rubbing her head where it struck the ground. It feels bruised, but she doesn't feel dizzy enough to worry about a concussion.

"I'm fine," she says for the fifth time within a minute, either to Deku

or to their homeroom teacher. “I just landed weird.”

Aizawa checks her pupils for a moment before agreeing with her, and then everyone’s attention is arrested.

Todoroki and Ojiro’s fight is getting a little intense; fighting with people nearby must mean that Todoroki can’t unleash his quirk the way he would normally want to, so he’s forced to fight in close-quarters against the one person in their entire class who’s *insanely good* in close quarters.

Todoroki’s insanely good, too, so it makes for a pretty close match. Other pairs are pausing to watch, and Aizawa-sensei doesn’t tell anyone to get back to their own practice. He probably figures they can learn something from watching them fight. Ochako leaves off rubbing her sore head and tries to; sparring with Gunhead was great, but she wasn’t with him long enough to learn moves like this. Deku is just as intent as she is. She sees his fingers twitch at his sides, like he’s writing imaginary notes.

The match gets crazy close—so close that for a moment, Ochako is sure that Ojiro is going to knock Todoroki off his feet. But at the last minute, Todoroki lashes out, Ojiro chokes, and a second later he’s landing on his tail on the mat.

Beside her, Deku makes a noise that sounds almost like a laugh.

“Sorry.” She’s close enough to hear Todoroki’s sheepish tone.

“*Wasn’t expecting that,*” Ojiro wheezes.

“If you need to go to Recovery Girl, go,” Aizawa tells him.

Ojiro gives a thumbs up. “*I’m fine*.”

“Hey, come on, man!” Kirishima calls over, glaring at Todoroki. “Did you seriously just punch him in the throat? That’s a cheap shot, Todoroki!”

“Keep in mind that most villains aren’t above moves like that.” Aizawa-sensei raises his voice so that everyone can hear—by this point, the whole class is paying attention. “You aren’t here to learn a sport; you’re here to learn how to deal with villains. And in a fight, you perform how you practice. If you practice expecting your opponent to fight fair, then you won’t last long. Besides—” His eyes glint. “There’s no such thing as fairness in a fight for your life. If

underhanded tactics are necessary to save lives and end a conflict before more people get hurt, then swallow your pride and use them." He looks to Todoroki. "That being said, this is still only training."

"I was being gentle," Todoroki answers.

"He really was." Ojiro's on his feet again, rubbing his neck, but he looks okay. "I could tell. Still caught me off guard."

"Man," Sero remarks, loud enough for most of the class to hear. "Who would've thought Todoroki could fight dirty? Necessary or not, fighting like that's pretty shady for a hero."

"That's what I told *him*," Todoroki says, shooting a withering look at Deku.

"Wh—*no*." Deku almost sputters. "No—no, you don't get to call *me* out for a cheap shot right after you used it *and* it worked."

"Wait, what?" Ochako turns to him, confused. "I don't remember you throat-punching him in the Sports Festival."

"It, uh." Almost instantly Deku goes from comically incensed to sheepish. "Wasn't in the Sports Festival."

"We spar after school twice a week," Todoroki adds.

"*What?!*" Bakugou roars from the other side of the room, loud enough that Deku startles like a rabbit.

"I-i-it's good practice," Deku says.

"If you're all done discussing your classmates' work ethic, and no one needs to visit the nurse, then you can return to your assigned training," Aizawa-sensei breaks in before the discussion can continue. His brow furrows, and he looks from Deku to Todoroki. "As for you two, keep in mind that there are rules in place regardless of whether or not school is in session, and breaking them—"

"We don't use quirks," Midoriya cuts in. "It's just hand-to-hand."

"Good. Continue, everyone."

Ochako tries to focus on the rest of the class. It's not as easy as it should be, with the gears turning in her head the way they are.

The moment school is done for the day, she packs her things hastily

and waits for Deku to do the same. She thinks at first that they'll probably have to track down Todoroki, but once again Deku's new friend falls in with them. Ever since the Sports Festival and the week of internships, their trio of her, Deku, and Iida has become a quartet with Todoroki along.

The moment they're all occupying the same physical space, she speaks up.

"I want in."

Deku gives her an owlish blink. "Huh?"

Ochako takes a deep breath. "On your after-school sparring thing. When do you guys get together?"

"Um. Mondays and Wednesdays, usually? Sometimes weekends." Deku looks taken aback. Honestly, it's like he doesn't even know her.

"Okay, look, I understand if it's your thing, like your two-person manly bonding sessions, but if it's okay with you, I'd like to get in on it too." Ochako bounces on the balls of her feet. "I only have one week of combat training outside of what we all do in class together, and I want to do more. When I look at you guys and Bakugou and Ojiro and everybody, I feel like I'm falling behind, and I want to catch up. So I want in. If that's okay."

"It's okay with me," Deku answers readily. "Todoroki?"

"I'm fine with it." He blinks. "What… what was that about manly bonding?"

"Now—wait a minute!" Iida breaks in. "Are you all quite sure this is safe? The reason why institutions like UA exist is that there are rules in place, and our classes have structures and regulations to help enforce those rules and make sure proper safety procedures are observed. Unsupervised training carries risks—"

"You could always come along," Todoroki interrupts. "If you're that worried about it."

"Yeah!" Deku brightens. "I bet we'd get a lot more out of it, with four of us."

"W-well—well I—" For a moment, Iida looks almost flustered. "I suppose—as class rep, I do have a responsibility to make sure my

fellow students are properly observing rules and regulations… if I'm not unwelcome, I'd be happy to."

"Plus, final exams are coming up," Deku adds. "It could be like a study group for hand-to-hand combat."

Apparently, the magic words are "study group". Iida goes from hesitant to thoughtfully eager in the blink of an eye.

That Wednesday, Izuku meets Todoroki at the park where they usually spar. He's within ten feet of their meeting place when he stops, jaw dropping.

Todoroki, Iida, and Uraraka are already there. So are Ojiro, Kaminari, Jirou, Yaoyorozu, and Kirishima, with Bakugou standing beside him looking fully prepared to blow up the first person who speaks.

"Heya!" Kirishima greets him, and Bakugou miraculously doesn't try to explode his face. "We heard something about a study group for hand-to-hand combat?"

Baffled, Izuku glances at Todoroki, who can only offer him a helpless little shrug. At his side, Rei clutches her stomach and laughs.

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“The first rule of Study Group is—”

“Kaminari, c’mon.” Kirishima rolls his eyes.

“—don’t talk about Study Group,” Kaminari finishes, snickering, which prompts Kirishima to groan loudly. “Aw, c’mon, Kirishima! I would’ve thought you’d like that movie. You’re all about manly-man stuff, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, not *fake* manly,” Kirishima informs him. “There’s a difference between manliness and being an entitled dudebro.”

“That’s true,” Jirou says, straight-faced. “Just look at Bakugou, he’s like the poster child for toxic masculinity.”

“*You want to say that to my face, you ear-dangling fuck?*”

“I just did!”

Off to the side, Izuku takes a deep breath and ignores the prickling up his spine when Bakugou starts yelling again. He takes another deep breath and counts to ten, then continues until he reaches thirty-five and a tap on his arm jolts him back to the present.

“Are you all right?” Todoroki asks him mildly.

“*Peachy*,” he answers. It comes out a great deal more serene than he feels, and he’s not entirely sure it matches whatever is showing on his face. Rei isn’t fooled, if the conciliatory shoulder-patting is any clue, and Kaminari and Yaoyorozu are giving him odd looks. He presses his hands together in front of his face, fingertips whitening. After a moment, once he feels that his feelings are properly leashed, he lets his hands drop to his sides again.

Why is he so upset? He gets along with most of them. Ojiro and Kirishima he even tentatively considers *friends*. He likes them and he hopes they like him too. It’s only Bakugou who sets the hard, heavy pit in his stomach, so why does it bother him that they’ve *all* tagged along?

A loudly clearing throat turns every head toward Iida. “Everything else aside,” he says. “Kaminari does make a good point.”

Kaminari blinks. “I do?”

“He does?” Jirou asks.

“Yes! Well. We weren’t expecting to have so many people involved, so perhaps things would run more smoothly if we set some ground rules.”

“Rule one is don’t talk about—”

“Give it a rest, Kaminari,” Ojiro sighs.

“Maybe we *should* include that,” Todoroki mutters, too quietly for anyone but Izuku to hear. “Talking about it is what led to a quarter of the class inviting themselves.” Izuku coughs out a quiet laugh that can still reasonably be mistaken for a cough.

“Hey, Deku? Todoroki?” Uraraka pipes up. “This is kind of your thing. What do you two think?”

“Well… the only real rule we have is that we don’t use quirks,” Izuku answers with a shrug. “Because otherwise it’d be, y’know, kind of illegal.”

“And the fight stops if one of us wants to stop,” Todoroki adds. “Immediately, no questions asked.”

“You know what?” Izuku says, slipping his backpack from his shoulders. “Let me get out my notebook and write some of these down.”

Over the next ten minutes, they cobble together a list of six basic rules. Well, technically there are only four, but Izuku writes “Don’t talk about Study Group” as the first two, if only to get Kaminari to stop trying to make that joke work. He’s barely finished writing “Serious injuries that would require Recovery Girl mean the match is over and the instigator is banned,” when the nitroglycerin on Bakugou’s palms erupts with his impatience, and Izuku’s pen scores a dark line across the page that nearly rips through the paper entirely.

“Come *on* already!” he snarls. “The only reason why I came in the first fucking place was because there was supposed to be some actual fighting happening! I’m not here to waste my time talking all day!”

“That’s probably enough for now anyway,” Yaoyorozu says, ignoring his outburst. “We can establish more rules as the situation calls for it.”

“We still haven’t decided to structure this,” Iida says. “I doubt we can all spar at the same time the way we do in class, because then it’s far more difficult to enforce these rules…” That sparks another discussion-slash-argument, and Izuku can feel Bakugou’s impatience mounting.

He’s not entirely sure how his and Todoroki’s biweekly sparring practice has morphed into this cumbersome production, but the ball is rolling and he’s not about to stop it when they might be on to something.

“Hey.” He twitches at the sound of Bakugou’s voice, so close to him so suddenly. Menace drips from his words like molten iron. “Get one thing straight, Deku—I see what you’re fucking doing, and it’s not gonna work.”

Izuku swallows against the lump in his throat. “I think that’s two things, actually—”

“Shut the fuck up, Deku,” Bakugou snarls, heedless of the fact that just a few feet away, a little girl ghost’s patience is also wearing dangerously thin. “You think you can mouth off like you’re better than me just because you’ve been sneaking around with Half-face for extra practice? Get fucking real.”

“S-see, the fu-funny thing about that is—” He’s starting to stammer. It’s severely impacting his ability to sound breezy and carefree. “—these, um, sparring practice sessions? That me and Todoroki have b-been doing? A-actually have nothing to do with you.”

“Don’t talk like you’re above it all, you little shit!” Bakugou snaps. “You’re not fucking better than me!”

“Midoriya never said he was!” Iida says, leaving off trying to guide the discussion.

Bakugou barely looks at him as he snaps back. “Can it, four-eyes, this is between me and Deku.”

“No it isn’t,” Izuku says, trying not to raise his voice over the sudden rushing noise in his ears. “There’s nothing between us.” Without thinking, he shifts back. Kirishima’s looking over, opening his mouth, probably to try and placate Bakugou. More people are getting

involved, and that's the last thing he wants—to drag his friends into his and Bakugou's dark, muddied history. So he shifts back, turns away to put distance between himself and Bakugou, and finds it easier to speak when Todoroki and Uraraka fall in his line of vision instead. "Anyway, if we're gonna get started we should decide—"

"Quit blowing me off, Deku!" and Bakugou's hand closes on his upper arm.

There's a split second in which nothing happens, and within it Izuku believes, for that minuscule increment of time, that it's finally getting better. That maybe, this time, he can react to a simple grip on his arm like a functioning human being.

But then he realizes that the reason why it feels as if nothing happens is that it's silent, and the reason why it's silent is that his ears are so thick with white noise that he can't hear a thing. He's staring at Bakugou, face blank, as Bakugou's mouth moves and Izuku hears none of the words coming out of it.

He blinks, his ears pop, and the first thing he hears is "—then fight me."

"What?"

The grip tightens, and terror drills into his mind like an ice pick through his skull. Rei jerks into view like she's been shocked, and her face melts away to something skeletal and malevolent. Darkness creeps into the edges of his vision and Bakugou *won't let go*.

"I said fight me." Red eyes bore into him, burning points of baleful light. "You here to fucking spar or not, Deku? *Fight me*."

"Let go." The words are out before he can stop them, and a mouthful of bile nearly follows them.

"Are you hearing me—?"

"Whoa—whoa!" And then Kirishima is between them, his hardened grip closing on Bakugou's wrist. "That's enough, okay? Come on, Bakugou, you said you'd be cool about this."

"I never fucking said that," Bakugou growls.

"We're here to practice, remember?" Kirishima goes on, ignoring him. "There's a difference between training and just picking a fight."

“The hell there is—”

Rei’s patience snaps, and Izuku’s ears burn with her enraged screams. Curved finger-claws plunge into Bakugou’s chest, and the words stutter in his mouth before petering out to nothing. Red eyes widen until they’re fully ringed with white, the crushing iron grip leaves Izuku’s arm, and he remembers what it feels like to have lungs.

His best and oldest friend hovers between him and Bakugou, and his vision clears. The only darkness he sees now is what gathers around her, as dense and heavy as a miniature black hole.

“Fine.” It’s not confidence that forces an answer from Izuku. It’s not even anger. But in that moment, he looks around and finds everyone staring at him. Alarmed. Confused. And he wants to duck out—he wants to turn and go straight home, but if he does then people will wonder why—they’ll ask questions—they’ll want to know why Bakugou makes him act like this, why he makes Bakugou act like this, and—

So he does what he knows he would do if he weren’t so terribly afraid of Bakugou.

“If you want to spar so bad, then fine,” he says, and he’s proud of how light his voice is. It’s easy to be brave when he’s surrounded by friends, surrounded by Rei, with Bakugou’s grasp only a memory and a light ache in his arm. “No need to throw a fit over it.” His confidence is like a cloud of smoke—swelling and spreading, but only as insubstantial wisps. A light swat would clear it away.

“Hey, I want to spar someone first!” Uraraka breaks in, and her high voice cuts through the fog still hanging heavy in his skull. “I-I mean—it’s only fair, right?”

“Fair how?” Kaminari asks.

“How about the fact that Iida and I were actually invited?” she says dryly.

More than a few of the others exchange sheepish looks.

Jirou isn’t one of them. “Wait a sec,” she says, stepping in. “So are we gonna take turns on this, or just break up into pairs or whatever and do our own thing? We still haven’t decided.”

“Take turns!” Kaminari calls out. “Take turns! We should totally take

turns so we can watch each other fight!"

"Man, you are *really* fixated on this Fight Club thing," Ojiro mutters.

"It makes sense, though," Uraraka pipes up. "If we watch, then we can demonstrate stuff and critique each other, right?"

"And act as collective referees," Iida agrees. "Not that I don't trust you all, of course! But more than one of us have had a history of… getting carried away, with practice bouts." Bakugou snarls wordlessly.

"That's putting it lightly," Jirou mutters.

"Besides, we do it that way in class because we have teachers supervising us," Yaoyorozu adds. "And if we're going to do this ourselves, then we're going to have to keep each other in check. So, spectating each sparring match is the best way to do it."

"Okay, cool!" Kirishima brings his hands together sharply. "It's settled, then."

"Sure is!" Uraraka says cheerfully. "Fight me."

Kirishima blinks. "What?"

"C'mon, spar with me!" She bounces on the balls of her feet, eyes glinting eagerly. "There're some moves I learned from Gunhead that I didn't get to try out in class!"

It doesn't take long for Kirishima's surprise to turn to delight. "All right! Bring it on, Uraraka!" He happily ignores the impatient scowl that Bakugou tries to beam into the side of his head, and joins Uraraka in the middle of the rough semicircle that the others are forming.

Izuku ends up with Todoroki standing between him and Bakugou, and he has to wonder if that's just how the cards fell, or if he's instinctively hiding. His stomach turns at the thought, but he swallows his shame and continues to look at Uraraka, at Kirishima, at anyone who isn't Bakugou. Privately, a small part of him wishes that Uraraka and Kirishima's match would last the full two or three hours before he can reasonably excuse himself.

"One of you fuckers better hurry up and get your ass kicked," Bakugou snarls. "We don't have all *day*."

"I'll spar against whoever wins," Todoroki says, and his facial

expression doesn't even twitch when Bakugou screams in inarticulate rage.

Tape on Uraraka's fingers—one on each hand—keeps her from activating her quirk by accident. Izuku watches eagerly as his two friends trade blows. The change in Uraraka is startling; it was hard not to notice it when they were sparring in class, and it's just as obvious when he's on the outside looking in. If anything, he can see it with more clarity like this. Instead of having to observe lightning-fast and react, he can stand back and let his analytical eye take in the progress that his friend shows. Whatever teaching strategies Gunhead used, they *worked*.

Still, Kirishima eventually floors her first by virtue of a more solid center of gravity, and Uraraka demands that they extend it to best of three. They have an audience now—not just classmates, but curious spirits wandering through the park are stopping by to observe. He's glad of that—Rei gets bored easily, Tensei didn't come, and Izuku can't give her his full attention when he's surrounded by his living friends like this.

Their cheering rings in Izuku's ears when Uraraka wins the next round, and then the third.

There's a pause for a break, and a friendly tousle between Kaminari and Ojiro evolves into a sparring match all on its own. True to the rules they've established, Ojiro keeps his tail out of it as best he can, but even with that handicap he still knocks Kaminari off his feet. Bakugou stews quietly in the background and does little more than scowl.

Gradually, Izuku relaxes again.

"You're telegraphing too much," Todoroki says, the second time he beats Uraraka. Izuku winces on her behalf. It's not that Izuku's a better fighter than her, but he's simply been sparring with Todoroki *longer*, and he's learned his friend's tells. He can match the feeling of Todoroki's weight shifting to most of the moves in his friend's arsenal, and he has no doubt that Todoroki has learned his rhythm just as well, but he still has a distinct advantage that Uraraka lacks.

"How do you figure?" Uraraka's breathing hard, both from exertion and from hitting the ground so roughly.

"You swing wide when you're about to make a move, most of the time," Todoroki answers. "It's easy to tell what you're going to do

next. It's not as much of a problem when you fight Kirishima because he does the exact same thing."

"Hey!"

"Besides that, you tire out too quickly," Todoroki continues, ignoring Kirishima. "You use too much energy for too little. You need to move more efficiently."

Uraraka chews her lower lip, frowning thoughtfully. "How, though?"

Todoroki's brows knit together. "It's… it's hard to explain."

"It's mostly intuitive for you at this point," Yaoyorozu says. "Isn't it? You haven't had to think about it in a while?"

"More or less," Todoroki says, shrugging in a way that's almost apologetic.

"I… think I have some ideas," Ojiro offers. "C'mere a second, Uraraka, I think I can help."

Study Group is, in Izuku's humble opinion, a success. Any worries he'd had over sabotaging himself by only sparring with one person are rendered moot. Sparring with Todoroki is vastly different from sparring with Ojiro, who in turn is vastly different from Uraraka or Kirishima. All four of them manage to drag him into a few rounds, and Kaminari wheedles him into showing him a few throws.

They're almost an hour and a half in, and Izuku isn't sure how much longer Bakugou will allow himself to be stalled, when his phone rings from where he left it with his bag. He's hot and sweaty and liberally grass-stained as he retrieves it and answers the call.

"Hello, Izuku!" his mother's voice greets him cheerfully. Somewhere in the background, something breaks. Maybe glass, maybe ceramic. "Are you having fun with your friends?"

"Yeah, Mom—is something wrong?"

"I'm afraid so," she says, sounding contrite. "It's Mr. Kurosawa again —I think he's having bit of a fit. He's just started throwing things again. Only the cheap corner store plates, though, so don't worry because I can always—" A distant clatter drowns out her next words. It sounds a bit like a full drumset tipping over. "Oh, dear, he's gotten to the pan cabinet. I'm so sorry to pull you out, Izuku, but you always

know how to talk him down."

"It's okay, Mom, I'll be right over." Izuku hangs up, sighing a little—it's either relief or faint exasperation, he isn't sure. Rei, hearing him, darts back from where she's been trying to catch ladybugs to join him. "Sorry, guys, I gotta go. Something came up." He tries not to make it obvious that he's very deliberately not looking at Bakugou when he says this.

It doesn't matter, because Bakugou's already dubious patience snaps. "You're seriously ducking out now?" he demands.

"Said I'd fight you," Izuku answers, purposely keeping his voice light. "Never said when." To the others he offers a sheepish look. "Sorry, guys, I thought I'd have more time."

"It's cool, man," Kirishima says with a grin. "You okay with us carrying on without ya?"

"I-I don't have a problem with it!" Izuku looks to Todoroki instinctively, but his friend simply shrugs at him and goes back to watching Ojiro critique Kaminari's technique. "Um, anyway… I'd better get going."

"Want some of us to tag along?" Uraraka suggests. "We could still hang out, Deku."

"N-not a good idea," he says. "Pipes are being repaired. The guy's trying to raise his prices, so my mom wants me home to help haggle him back down."

"Darn. Maybe some other time, then!"

"Yeah, maybe," he answers. "See you in class, guys!"

The jog from the park to home isn't a long one, and Izuku is barely out of breath when he reaches his door. Rei is already inside before he gets it unlocked, and he can hear a commotion still going on within.

A waft of air freshener scent hits his nostrils as he walks in. It's the citrusy kind that Morino likes—Mom must have gone out and bought more. Further into the apartment, he can hear Kurosawa's familiar panicked sobbing, before something clatters into the wall and Rei lets out an unearthly shriek. With a sigh, Izuku jogs to investigate.

The kitchen looks like a war zone. A few of the cheap dishes from the

pantry lie broken on the floor, along with at least half the contents of the cookware cabinet. Pots, pans, saucepans, and lids are strewn about the place, and his mother is off to the side, out of range of any more projectiles while she tries to clear away the edge of the mess. Kurosawa flits about, blinking in and out of view, screaming and crying out while Rei tries in vain to chase and corral him. Blood pours from the wounds that killed him, and with a sweep of his arm he sends a row of spice shakers flying.

"Sorry, Mom," Izuku says, raising his voice to be heard when Kurosawa slams a cabinet door. "Kurosawa! Mr. Kurosawa, please, you're all right—!"

"*No, no, please—get away from me!*"

It's always like this, when Kurosawa has one of these poltergeist episodes. He forgets everything that's happened between today and the day he died; he returns to that night, and his blood spatters the floor all over again.

Rei finally pounces and catches him, forcing him to stay in one place. He struggles wildly, but he can't melt and mold and shift his form the way she can. If he wriggles free, she catches him again and holds him still. He quiets for a moment, transparent tears pouring down his face, and Izuku seizes the opportunity.

"Kurosawa, you're dead!"

The ghost stutters in Rei's grip like a broken video, sobbing hoarsely in the center of the kitchen. Izuku swallows the taste of bile as it creeps into his mouth. In his more lucid moments, Kurosawa has told him that he once lived in this apartment, decades ago, and he died in it too. (Not in the kitchen, though. He hid in the closet when he heard robbers come in, and they panicked and killed him when they found him by accident.)

"They already killed you, Mr. Kurosawa," Izuku tells him. He's lost count of how many times he's had to remind him. "They can't hurt you anymore. No one can."

Kurosawa cries out as if his heart is breaking. Rei lets go, and the kitchen is empty. Morino and Mrs. Matsuda peek out from the hallway, but don't come out.

His mother gets to her feet, sighing in faint exasperation. "I was saying the very same thing to him, before you even came home," she

says. “They listen to you far better.”

“Rei held him still for me. Thanks, Rei.” Izuku sets about picking up the scattered cookware. His mother joins him briskly. The kitchen is a mess, but it’s not so bad when there’s two of them.

“Did you have fun?” she asks. “With your friends?”

“Yeah, it was pretty cool. A bunch of my classmates showed up.” Izuku opens one of the lower cabinets and starts organizing pans into a neat stack.

“That’s good. Make sure you throw that shirt in the wash, okay? The fast you do it, the easier it is to get those grass stains out.”

“Okay, Mom.”

“I’ll make sure to use to stronger detergent—oh dear, did he come back?”

“Huh?” Izuku looks over his shoulder, to find his mother staring in concern at Rei. The latter is picking her way through the mess, picking up broken pieces of ceramic. To his mother’s eyes, it must look like the fragments are floating on their own. “Oh—no, that’s just Rei, she’s trying to help. Wastebasket’s under the sink, Rei.” His friend dutifully opens the cabinet and drops the broken plates in.

“Oh,” his mother says softly. “That’s… that’s new, isn’t it? I thought you said it was hard for them to, to pick things up and move them.”

“It… usually is,” Izuku replies, as Rei continues clearing away the ceramic shards. “I dunno, I think Rei’s getting stronger.”

“Kurosawa too,” his mother says. “That’s easily the worst it’s ever been. Usually he just knocks a few things over, or pulls everything off the hangers in the closet. First time I’ve ever seen things fly.”

“I… guess they’re all getting stronger,” Izuku says softly. “Around me.” He purses his lips. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize for your own quirk, dear.”

“It’s both of them,” he says softly.

She looks up, arms laden with kitchenware. “Pardon?”

“I mean—” Izuku pauses. “This quirk that All-Might gave me. It

doesn't just make my body stronger; it makes my quirk stronger, too." All the pans are back in their proper place, so he closes the cabinet. "There have been… things. Little things, like Kurosawa throwing things or Rei picking things up, more easily than before. But there's also—I've seen ghosts, Rei especially, touch people. And just looking at their faces, I could swear that they feel her. Not the way I can, but they feel *something*." He rocks back on his heels. "Rei told me that she made Todoroki get to me faster in Hosu, but I'm not sure how, and I don't know how to ask Todoroki if he felt her. And at the USJ, Aizawa-sensei fell unconscious, and I saw him too. He wasn't even dead, but I saw him and I talked to him, and he doesn't remember any of it now, but sometimes I catch him looking at me like he's trying to remember to tell me something. I can't prove anything, but sometimes I wonder if I would've seen him if I didn't have One For All."

His mother is quiet for a moment after he finishes, silently turning things end over end in her head. Rei has cleared away almost all the broken dishes when Mpm finally raises her head and speaks. "Izuku, have you… have you considered, well… telling anyone?"

Fear slams him like a mallet, and in an instant he finds himself standing on the precipice—one step, one wrong move, and he'll pitch forward into the crashing waves. He feels things, crawling things—cold fingertips spidering up and down his arms, his spine, his neck. But it's not ghosts this time, no—just fear. Just cold dread and terror, locking tight around his throat and his heart like a noose of barbed wire.

"Can't say I have," he says.

"Before I say anything else, I need you to know—at the end of the day, I won't force you. And I won't tell you who you should or shouldn't trust." She purses her lips. "I want you to feel safe, and right now, keeping this a secret makes you feel safe. You'd have to get me good and desperate before I ever touched that. But… I've seen you, Izuku. You're so… so *bright*, and *happy*, and you always were, but never at school, and never with other living people." He can see tears glistening briefly in her eyes. "But now… it's not like it was with—with Katsuki. It's like they raise you higher, sweetheart."

"They do," he whispers. His voice is hoarse. "And I can't risk losing that."

Her face falls. "I understand," she says softly. "And I'll support you, no matter what. But Izuku… at least consider telling All-Might."

“I have,” he answers. “ Considered it, I mean. I think about it every day. But… I can’t, Mom. I just can’t, yet.” He leaves the “yet” in. Might as well allow a little hope for the future.

Aizawa lets his scarf mask how he sighs deeply as he feels the newly excited fervor buzzing among his students. It’s not like he wasn’t expecting this; saying the phrase “summer training camp in the woods” out loud to twenty teenagers is the fastest way to wake up a room full of twenty teenagers. The eagerness will stick with them over the next few weeks, and with any luck it will keep them energized and motivated throughout their exams.

He’d be lying if he said he wasn’t a little eager, as well. It won’t be all fun and games; the camp is a decent opportunity to gather the first-years and test them in new ways, and the heroes they have lined up to help with training are competent, trustworthy, and enthusiastic.

His students are enthusiastic as well, though sometimes—

“You’re really trying my goddamn nerves, shitrag!” he hears Bakugou roar, and pauses in the hallway before his students can spot him. It’s been a while since he’s seen Bakugou work himself up into a proper self-righteous fury. “You’re gonna eat shit before the term is over, you cocky little bastard!” As Aizawa watches, Midoriya spends a moment staring straight through Bakugou before turning and cold-shouldering him, which predictably does nothing to improve Bakugou’s mood.

Aizawa sighs. Bakugou’s worse than ever, and the exam stress probably isn’t helping. His interactions with Midoriya have never been anything but turbulent—something’s going to have to be done about that.

The students in Class 1-A aren’t the only ones getting into the spirit of things, either; Class 1-B is as earnest as ever, every bit as determined and strong for all that they didn’t share in the events at the USJ. Though, he *will* have to have a word with Sekijurou and some of the other teachers if that Monoma kid keeps trying to stir up drama. Heaven knows they don’t need yet *another* trigger for Bakugou’s temper running around. Ms. Kendou can’t babysit him all the time.

And speaking of teachers…

By some ordained miracle, All-Might still has time left in his hero

form by the last period of the day, and he takes the opportunity to address the students with some last-minute sage advice.

The advice itself is good. Valuable, even. But still, watching from an objective viewpoint, it's all Aizawa can do to keep from rolling his eyes.

All-Might makes his dearth of experience painfully obvious whenever he steps in to teach. Any teacher would be lying if they said they didn't have favorite students, but at least most of them can hide it reasonably well. Not so with All-Might; Midoriya Izuku is his favorite, and everyone with a bare minimum of half a brain and one eye can tell.

It makes perfect sense, of course. Midoriya may be quiet, skittish, unpredictable, and downright *strange* at times, but Aizawa can see the seeds of that same dogged sense of duty that All-Might has in spades. Midoriya is brave, selfless to the point of being self-destructive, and brimming with far more single-minded determination than should reasonably fit in a body that size, and Aizawa is willing to bet money that All-Might recognizes a kindred spirit when he sees one. Just… one that's a little more fidgety than he is.

But Aizawa sees something new now.

Class is more or less over now, and All-Might is still hanging around (really, how much longer does he have in that form?) and chatting with students. He keeps looking to Midoriya, as if to check that he's still there, but to his credit he's giving due attention to everyone present.

Midoriya catches his eye, and when All-Might looks, the boy's hands curl and gesture. This, by itself, is nothing extraordinary; Midoriya gesticulates more than anyone else who isn't Iida, and Aizawa suspects that he'd go mute of his hands were tied.

Except, for the first time, Aizawa recognizes it. It's not that different from Midoriya's usual nervous hand-wringing; Midoriya's hands jump and fidget almost every time Aizawa happens to glance his way. But now there's a clear purpose and direction to the movements, as clear and deliberate as if Midoriya were shaping the air like clay, and most of all it's recognizable.

The motions are brief, and to Aizawa's vague surprise, All-Might responds in kind.

Since when does All-Might know sign language? he wonders, but that's hardly as pressing a concern as what they're actually saying.

Aizawa's knowledge of sign language is limited to what is useful in stealth missions, with other heroes who happen to know it, and he'll be the first to admit that his comprehension isn't the best. That's the main reason he never recognized Midoriya's fidgets as sign, much less understood them.

Probably just more muttering, given Midoriya's verbal habits.

But now they're clear enough, and simple enough, for Aizawa to pick up on them, and what he reads in the gestures has him sidling up to All-Might once the students are out of earshot.

"So is there a reason why Midoriya knows about your time limit?" he asks, and tries not to feel too smug when All-Might startles like a baby deer. It's an odd and awkward action for such a hulking figure.

"W-what?" All-Might almost shouts, then forcibly lowers his voice. "What exactly do you mean, Aizawa?"

"I saw your little exchange just now," Aizawa says flatly. "How many of the students know, and why wasn't I made aware?"

"I—er." All-Might looks a little poleaxed. "Just the one," he says at last. "Only Midoriya, none of the others."

In an act of unmatched self-control, Aizawa manages not to roll his eyes. "*Really*. All-Might, I know you like the kid and I understand why, but confiding in him about something like that is taking the favoritism a little far, don't you think?"

"I don't—I didn't—" All-Might splutters, clearly flustered. "I didn't confide in him, Aizawa—"

"How'd he find out, then?"

"Er." All-Might blinks at him. "Well—that is…"

"USJ," Midoriya says from behind him, and he damn near manages to sneak up on Aizawa. He hears the boy coming, but it's a closer thing than it is with most students.

Aizawa turns and looks at him sharply. "What was that?" Midoriya looks up from his phone—Aizawa can see him browsing gifs of baby

animals from here.

“It was at the USJ,” Midoriya replies, and *oh*, that's why All-Might has that hangdog look on his face. No one likes to remind Aizawa of the time a villain smeared him into the pavement in front of a handful of terrified students. “I was right next to him when the teachers showed up and ran off the rest of the villains, but my legs were sort of useless, so he couldn't really make me leave before his time ran out.”

“That must have been a shock,” Aizawa says, and his voice sounds deadpan even by his own standards.

“I think I screamed,” Midoriya replies just as nonchalantly, glancing down at a moving photograph of a kitten falling off of a pillow. “But I *did* have two broken legs, so I don't think anyone thought anything of it.”

All-Might looks pleasantly sheepish, and Aizawa tucks away this new piece of information. It's good to know there's at least one student in his class that he doesn't need to be over-cautious around concerning All-Might’s secret. And, he supposes, it's a comfort that the injured idiot has one more set of eyes to watch him.

Not that Midoriya has a history of exercising caution, but All-Might might as well take what he can get.

Aizawa heaves a sigh and lets his usual disinterested mask fall back into place. “You two deserve each other,” he says flatly, and moves off again before either of them can reply.

“That was quick thinking, my boy.”

Izuku hums quietly and puts his phone away, all the while catching Ms. Shimura’s eye and trying to convey “Thanks for the warning” through facial expressions alone. “Not really,” he admits. “I've sort of had that one prepared.”

“Oh?” All-Might raises an eyebrow at him.

Izuku shifts in place uncomfortably, cursing his own modesty. “I mean, sort of? Me knowing about your limit is pretty easy to excuse, and… you never know, right? Something might come up, and, well, something just came up, just now.”

“Hm.” All-Might looks thoughtful for a moment, before apparently

deciding upon approval. “Well, I *will* say that for heroes in general, especially considering out… unique situation, that's just the sort of skill that’s most useful for dealing with the press, young Midoriya.”

Izuku frowns. “Lying?”

“Sometimes. But mostly it's more like… deflecting. Crafting your answers in such a way that it encourages people not to probe further.”

“Oh,” Izuku says softly, pensively. That really is perfect, isn't it. “I can do that.”

In the blink of an eye, there’s only one more week before the end-of-term exams. Academics have never been Izuku’s weak point, but he still studies diligently at home, committing information and themes and mathematical formulas to memory. He won’t gain anything by being overconfident. Yaoyorozu’s tutoring half the class at this point, covering subjects across the board.

Majority rule leads them to arrange another “study group” meeting after school on Wednesday. Somehow, it’s gotten even more hectic than before.

“This… this is a good thing, right?” Todoroki asks him under his breath. “An improvement?”

Everyone who was at the previous meeting is here now, save for Kirishima who ducked out for the sake of an extra evening of cramming, but word has spread. Tsuyu is here today, as well as Sero, Hagakure, Ashido, and to the consternation of every girl present, Mineta.

“Who the hell invited him?” Jirou demands.

“I mean, technically nobody ‘invited’ you guys last time,” Uraraka points out. “I’m not sure this is really an invitee kind of thing anymore.”

“Who’s side are you on?” Jirou asks, quietly seething as Mineta nearly vibrates with excitement.

“I’m *just saying*.”

“I mean… I guess it was nice before, just hanging out,” Izuku answers with a shrug. “But this is probably better in the long run? For actually

figuring out hand-to-hand together. Especially since the practical exam is coming up and we technically don't know for sure what's in it."

"Mm." Todoroki takes in the scene for another beat. "Could do without Mineta."

"Yeah," Izuku sighs, relieved that Todoroki said it before he did.

"It's your first time here!" Kaminari calls out, pointing to the newcomers. "That means you gotta fight! It's in the rules!"

"No it's not, Kaminari, shut up!" Jirou yells.

In spite of this, the first sparring match to break out is between Uraraka and Tsuyu. Rei cheers in static from the sidelines as the girls take their positions and the match kicks off. Izuku can see Tsuyu biting down on her lip to keep from using her tongue.

(Mineta's wordless whooping turns into… *suggestions*. Said suggestions continue until Tsuyu foregoes the no-quirk rule to seize him around the waist with her tongue and shotput him halfway across the park.)

Izuku wants to watch the whole match, but a cool hand descends on his shoulder, and he looks up to see Iida Tensei watching him. The lateHero Ingenium barely bats an eye when Rei clambers up to sit on his shoulders.

Izuku hasn't heard much from Iida's older brother. He doesn't hover by Iida's side quite as constantly as before. Izuku assumes he has other things to attend to, other people to check up on. But he's here now, and Izuku grins at the sight of him.

"Hey," Tensei says. "You holding up okay?"

"Sure," Izuku says under his breath, barely moving his lips. "Why do you ask?"

"Why do I… Are you kidding, Midoriya, I really should have asked sooner." Tensei looks away briefly. "But I've been keeping busy lately, going around checking up on my old sidekicks and stuff, and after Hosu, I wasn't sure if you wanted the company or wanted to sort things out for yourself. Rei says you've been having a little trouble."

"Just bad dreams," Izuku murmurs. "Nothing I haven't dealt with before."

Tensei's about to reply when Rei hisses, and he looks up. "Watch out," he warns. Izuku turns to follow his gaze, and Bakugou's in his face before he has time to draw back.

"We're next." It's not a growl or a snarl. Bakugou says two words the way a hammer strikes an anvil, short and blunt and brooking no argument. "You and me. No more putting this off, Deku."

"Okay." His heart jumps to his throat and sticks there. All at once his nerves are ringing with tension, and he fights to keep it off of his face.

By some miracle, he manages to hold that as Uraraka and Tsuyu finish their match and Bakugou bulls his way into the middle of things. He imagines that his face is made of glass, smooth and cool and unmoving, slippery enough that nothing catches on it, nothing sticks. Everything slides right off, leaving the cold, polished surface unmarked and pristine.

Bakugou's knuckles crack when he makes fists, and Izuku remembers that glass is transparent, and it breaks easily.

It's too late to worry about that now, facing Bakugou and surrounded by people both living and dead. As he always does when he needs to, Izuku files it away to deal with later.

Bakugou, as always, starts with a strong right.

Izuku learned over three years of middle school to avoid those hands like his life depended on it, and there were moments in which he was sure it did. In this moment he tells himself, *no quirks, no quirks, he won't use his quirk,* but his ears ring with phantom explosions, and he ducks out of the way of the punch just in time to catch the other full on the shoulder. Landing the first hit galvanizes Bakugou into action, and the fight starts in earnest.

Immediately, it's starting poorly. Izuku is on the defensive, dodging and weaving and deflecting—or at least trying to. Bakugou's fists hurt, whether Izuku takes a hit or knocks it away.

He lets them come anyway. There's a rhythm to it. A pattern, even if Bakugou doesn't realize it. Izuku ducks and waits and dodges and watches, until Bakugou's breath hisses between teeth clenched in frustration.

"Stop screwing around and *fight me* already, Deku! Or are you too much of a little bitch to throw a punch at me?" Tension curls along his

spine at Bakugou's words.

Izuku fakes a punch at Bakugou's throat, and when Bakugou catches it, Izuku follows up with a knee to the gut. He's rewarded with a grunt of pain, and lashes out again, only for Bakugou to catch his other fist.

"You think your fucking cheap shots are gonna work on me?" Bakugou grits out, and Izuku fights against bile and nausea and ringing in his ears as he struggles to get free.

To his surprise, Bakugou lets go. It's not for the sake of kindness, though; Izuku can tell by the look in Bakugou's eyes. He's not being nice; he just isn't done making his point yet.

A sharp jab splits Izuku's lip, his heart rate spikes, and that's when he throws caution to the wind.

He's going to lose. The fight's only just started, but he knows instinctively that he's going to lose, just like he always loses. The tension spreads from his spine to his fingertips. He feels it in his teeth, buzzing and tingling and uncomfortably hot.

He's *frustrated*.

So he fights. It's the kind of fighting that he won't be proud of, when he looks back on it later. He pulls out every dirty trick, remembers every cruel weak point he's been taught. He aims low, he aims for the throat, he aims thumbs at Bakugou's eyes, he tries to get around behind him to jam his elbow into the spot where his kidneys are.It's low, it's dirty, and maybe he's fighting this way because he doesn't want to fight for real anymore, if he ever did. Fighting Bakugou doesn't make him feel like a hero, because Bakugou has a talent for making him feel *low*.

He wants to stop this stupid match, he wants to call for Rei, he wants to talk to Tensei or Ms. Shimura or Uraraka or Todoroki or Iida. He wants to *not be here anymore,* and that—

That *isn't fair*.

These sparring sessions were supposed to be a break from the pressure of school, a chance to train and practice under friendly eyes, to talk to his friend and make stupid jokes and challenge himself to get Todoroki to crack a smile. They're supposed to be *safe*, and—

Izuku nearly retches when Bakugou's fist makes full contact with his

stomach. While he's bent double, Bakugou grabs him in a headlock, and his vision goes white.

"Give up, Deku," Bakugou hisses, inches from his ear. "You're never gonna catch up, got it? No matter what you do, no matter how hard you try, I'm always gonna be better."

Bakugou wrecks everything he touches, but only the things that belong to Izuku. Every milestone Izuku reaches, Bakugou tramples. Every safe place Izuku carves out, he invades.

The arm around his neck tightens. But Izuku isn't choking yet. He can still breathe, just about.

"I said give up, Deku," Bakugou growls, and there are other voices now, calling foul, yelling at Bakugou to stop, but Bakugou ignores them. "I'll let go if you give up. Now *say it*, you worthless—*fffucking god damn it!*"

The taste of mingled sweat and blood foul his tongue, and then the arm around his neck is gone, his teeth ache when Bakugou's arm wrenches free, and Izuku find arms holding him back. Dark hair whips against his face—Rei. Rei is standing in front of him, and from the sound of her, she's angry. He isn't sure how strong she's gotten by now, but if Bakugou comes close again, he hates to think of what she'll do.

The fight is over, and Izuku goes limp.

Across from him, Bakugou strains against Kaminari, Sero, and Iida. He's clutching his wrist and glaring at Izuku with raw hatred in his eyes.

"Did you just *bite me*, shitrag?"

Oh.

Izuku spits into the grass until his mouth is dry. Someone pushes a water bottle into his hand, and he rinses.

"Okay, new rule," Jirou says. "Midoriya and Bakugou aren't allowed to fight each other anymore, because *what the hell*, you two."

"Sorry." Is he shaking? He hopes he isn't shaking, because there are still people holding on to him—oh, that's Uraraka, and Ojiro, and there's Todoroki stepping in front of him, a physical barrier just in

case he or Bakugou try to pick up where they left off.

(It won't be Izuku. Izuku didn't want this fight to happen at all.)

"Y-yes, that was…" Iida releases Bakugou reluctantly, and only when it's clear that he's not going to try to charge again. "I think it would be best if you both avoided sparring in the future."

Uraraka and Ojiro let go of him, and Izuku nearly sags to the ground then and there. He keeps his feet until Tensei appears at his side to steady him, and then he backs out to the edge again. "Sorry," he repeats. "Got carried away, lemme just—" He grabs his phone and nearly drops it twice as he checks it.

They'll have questions. They're all confused and alarmed, he can tell.

Maybe one day he'll find a way to explain things to them. But for now…

"My mom texted," he says, and doesn't even look up to see if anyone believes him. "Sorry, gotta go." Grabbing his things, he leaves the group and the park without a backward glance. No one stops him.

Messages come to him over the rest of the day. He answers none of them. At school, the few attempts to ask him about the incident die away. The group doesn't meet again for the rest of the week, and Izuku trains and studies on his own.

"We've already predetermined who you'll be paired with and which teacher you'll be fighting for this exam," Principal Nedzu explains. "We took into account your grades, your familiarity, and your fighting styles and strategies. The matchups are as follows."

Izuku's heart sinks when Todoroki and Yaoyorozu are paired together for the practical exam. He would have liked to team up with Todoroki —but then, that wouldn't have been much of a challenge. And he's partnered up with Uraraka enough that he doubts they would let them do it again.

Oh, well. There's really only one person he knows he can't work with, what are the odds that—

"Midoriya," Aizawa-sensei says. "You're with Bakugou."

Rei shrieks loud enough that it feels like he's being stabbed in the

eardrum, but Izuku simply gives a placid blink as the world comes crashing down around him.

Chapter End Notes

CW: Referenced past bullying, traumatic flashback (OC), character's safe space invaded by a former abuser, sparring match taken too far without stopping.

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

As always, have some fantastic Art!

By Bluehospitality

By Asdmabel

By Etsukow

By Quesadilla-Day

And, as always, this story has a TV Tropes page!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“S-sensei?”

Aizawa glances up. The rest of the bus is more or less empty; each exam will take place simultaneously at different UA training facilities, so the only passengers are himself and the two students he’ll be evaluating.

Yaoyorozu and Todoroki should be an interesting matchup. They are both skilled fighters, but opposites in terms of skill sets; Todoroki is powerful but relies a little too much on brute force, while Yaoyorozu is clever and analytical to the point of overthinking things and losing precious time.

Moreover, Yaoyorozu has been hesitant to assert herself recently, and Todoroki is often slow to notice the feelings of his classmates. A team-up like this should present an interesting challenge for them both.

But Yaoyorozu, for all her recent self-doubts, is speaking up now. She’s twirling a pencil in her fingers, tapping it against the notepad in her lap—both of which she produced with her quirk at some point during the drive. She seems to be taking notes and drawing up ideas now.

“Yes, Yaoyorozu?”

“Forgive me, if I’m being… um, impertinent, but… was it—you said

the matchups were predetermined by analyzing our abilities and familiarity with one another, right? They weren't randomized?"

He nods. "Randomization is all very well for training exercises, but this is specifically an evaluation of your abilities. We made our choices carefully."

"Oh." Yaoyorozu's eyes lower, and the tapping pencil increases speed. "Um… well… m-maybe not carefully enough?" Her eyes flicker toward Todoroki, who returns her glance before looking to Aizawa as well.

"Yaoyorozu, I'm sure you and Todoroki will have no trouble collaborating for this exam—"

"Oh, no, I mean yes, of course," she says quickly. "We will, there's no trouble there. But… with, um, some of the other match-ups—well, *one* of the other matchups—your analysis may have been…" The pencil twirls right out of her hand and clatters to the floor of the bus. Todoroki bends down to retrieve it and hand it back to her. "… Flawed," she finishes.

Aizawa blinks, takes in the worried expression that she directs toward the ground, and the subtle furrow in Todoroki's brow. He sighs. "You two should be worrying more about your own exam than Midoriya's."

"It's just—" Yaoyorozu blurts out. "I honestly—I know I'm only the assistant class rep, but I still know the whole class, and how they get along with each other, and Midoriya and Bakugou *don't*. Putting them together is like—it's like oil on fire."

"I'm aware of that," Aizawa replies. "That's part of why that particular matchup was chosen."

Yaoyorozu's jaw drops. "What?"

"Those two were chosen *because* they're on horrible terms," Aizawa explains. "Hopefully, they'll be able to use this chance to grow in more than simply strength." He takes a deep breath. He has no obligation to explain hi-'s decisions this early, especially since Bakugou and Midoriya's exam has little to do with them, but it would be better to put them at ease before their own test begins. "Be that as it may, they'll be guided personally by All-Might, whom they both hold in high regard, and both of them have the ability to work as a team. Whether or not they can use that ability in conjunction is up to them, and the entire purpose of testing them in this way."

When he finishes his explanation, Yaoyorozu's shoulders slump, but it looks less like relief and more like resignation. "I understand your reasoning," she says quietly, and he can't place her tone. He doesn't like that he can't place her tone; it gives the impression that he's missing something. "But… but still…"

"But it doesn't make it any less of a terrible idea," Todoroki finishes for her. She winces at his bluntness.

Aizawa heaves a sigh. "If they're unable to put aside personal feelings to get the job done, then clearly they need more guidance. Determining that is the point of an evaluation like this."

"He'll get the job done," Todoroki says. He doesn't look as tense as Yaoyorozu does, slouching a little against the back of his seat. "But it's going to end badly. You should probably know that. Whatever you're trying to accomplish with this, whatever you want out of it, it's not going to happen."

He says no more after that, and Yaoyorozu returns to her notepad. Eventually, hesitantly, she scoots over to sit next to Todoroki and show him what she has written. She makes another pencil for him, and they communicate through writing, eliminating any risk of Aizawa eavesdropping on their planning.

Not that he would have, if he had the chance. Now he's preoccupied.

Now he's *worried*.

"You two want to play Last Letter?"

All-Might doesn't get a response. If he expects a response, than he's giving them far more credit than Izuku thinks they probably deserve. He and Bakugou are sitting as far away from one another as possible; Bakugou's sitting in a seat facing the back of the bus, just so he doesn't have to look at them.

Izuku does look at All-Might, and hopes he conveys enough of what he feels through his face alone. It's not a sure thing. Sometimes he feels so much that none of it really comes out, and his face goes blank instead. This might be one of those times.

Of course, nothing coming out of him is far preferable to, say, the contents of his stomach coming out of him. Jury's still out on whether or not he can keep that in.

It doesn't feel right, that he's scared of a school test and the worst case scenario in his mind goes so much farther than simply not passing.

"I'm sorry." Ms. Shimura is a cool, comforting presence as she sits down by him. "Wish there was something I could do to change it. If it makes you feel any better, Toshi's not the one who threw you under the bus. Aizawa was the one who figured out the matchups."

Izuku tucks his head in, using the mouth guard of his suit to hide the movement of his lips. "Will you help me?" he whispers. "With this test?"

"You asking me to help you cheat, kiddo?"

He shrugs. "Heroes should use everything they have available. Seeing you is an aspect of my quirk. That's makes you… um." He can't think of a way to phrase this.

Luckily, Ms. Shimura seems to understand. "Makes me an asset, huh?"

He gives a tiny nod.

"Tell you what," she says, with a friendly squeeze of his shoulder. "If Toshi tries to ambush you, I'll give you a yell, and we can laugh at all the funny faces he makes while he tries to figure out why he can't sneak up on you. How's that?"

In spite of the fear that churns beneath the surface, Izuku has to fight the smile off of his face. He angles his face away from All-Might before murmuring, "Thanks, Ms. Shimura."

She blinks at him, smiles fondly, and tugs gently on one of his curls. "That's 'Nana' to you, munchkin. After everything I've told you, there's no need to be all formal with me."

"Okay, Ms. Nana."

"Fair enough."

"Thanks," he says. "If you're there, maybe it won't be so—"

A small explosion from the back of the bus cuts him off. "Deku, I swear to fuck if you don't shut up—"

"I don't want to be here either," he says, and gets a stream of curses in return.

“That’s hardly the best mindset to start with, if you two have any hope of passing,” All-Might admonishes them both. “I’ll explain the test once we arrive, but it would behoove you both to swallow your pride and try to get used to the idea of working together.”

Swallow his pride. Izuku’s not sure he has enough pride to scrape together into a decent mouthful, where Bakugou is concerned.

He’s not fast enough to smooth out his expression, because All-Might catches it. “Less of that, young Midoriya,” he says, gently chiding. “It may be unpleasant, but remember that this *is* a test.”

“No what this is—” Izuku blurts out, then stops himself. He forces his face to smooth emptiness again, though it’s more and more of a struggle with each passing minute. “This is exactly what I was actually afraid of. This is—All Might. This is the nightmare scenario.” Dramatic, maybe, but it’s true. This is the worst nightmare he could possibly have that doesn’t involve someone dying.

All-Might doesn’t get the chance to reply, because that’s when the bus arrives.

Izuku drags his feet on the way out of the bus, and quickly regrets it. With All-Might leading the way and Izuku dawdling, Bakugou has plenty of time to grab him and drag him close, heedless of the shallow breaths that hiss in and out of Izuku’s throat. Fumbling, Izuku tries to claw Bakugou’s hand off his arm, but his former friend’s grip doesn’t loosen until both Rei and Ms. Nana join in his efforts. They can’t quite touch him, but he lets go all the same.

“Let’s get one thing straight,” Bakugou hisses, far too close to his face for Izuku to feel anything but sick with old fear. He forces himself blank, keeps his limbs loose and his hands at his sides. “I don’t want a fucking repeat of day two, or the fucking Sports Festival, got it? None of your shitty tricks, and no fucking games, unless you want me to blast your slackjawed fucking face off. I’m gonna win, and it’s gonna be a *total* victory.” They’re not quite off the bus, and Bakugou blocks his escape with one gauntleted arm. “No more pointless fucking victories, is this getting through your head, Deku? Don’t fuck this up for me.” His voice is too low for All-Might to hear, but it drips with menace.

“Hurry it along, now!” All-Might calls. “We’re starting soon!”

Bakugou shoulders past him, heedless (probably) of the claw-fingered swipe that Rei aims at his back, and Izuku shakes his mind free of the

tangled dark thorns before he follows.

It's yet another one of UA's city-replica training facilities. But while the obstacle course where they held the rescue race exercise was more industrial-based, this place closely resembles a residential district. A twisting, maze-like residential district, the center of which was their starting line.

The test is simple enough. Thirty minutes on the clock, armed with nothing but their costumes and a pair of handcuffs. All they have to do to pass is either get the handcuffs on All-Might, or get one of them out one of the exit gates. Best of all, All-Might is already outfitted with suppressor cuffs to limit his quirk. Simple enough.

If it's so simple, then why can't Izuku stop *shaking*?

The test begins far too quickly, and All-Might all but vanishes into the false city. Ms. Nana goes with him, and Izuku can only hope she keeps her word from before.

"Don't follow me," Bakugou snaps at him, and sets off in… a direction. It's a piece of advice that Izuku ignores, in spite of his own better judgment. The only thing worse than having to work with Bakugou would be getting caught alone. It's bad enough in the eerie quiet, with Izuku jumping and fidgeting and eyeing every corner as if All-Might hides behind each one. Rei makes herself useful, flitting in and out of view to check their surroundings.

So far, nothing.

"We should find out how to get to the exits quickly," he says, and mentally pats himself on the back when his voice barely shakes. "All-Might probably knows this place better than we do."

"Fat fucking chance," Bakugou growls. Angry red eyes settle on Izuku for a split second too long before he turns away again. "I'm not planning on running like a little bitch. Didn't you hear me, Deku? I'm finishing this the *right* way."

Behind Bakugou's back, Izuku signals Rei. *Find the nearest exit,* he tells her. *See if All-Might is blocking the way.*

She hisses at him and shakes her head, pointing to Bakugou.

Go, he mouths. She bares her teeth, and they bristle like angler fish fangs. After nearly a full minute of silent argument, Rei finally relents

and vanishes in a huff. Izuku is left alone with Bakugou, still with no idea where All-Might is. He keeps an eye out for Ms. Nana.

“S-so, um… what *is* the plan?” Izuku forces the words out past the fear gathering thick and heavy in the back of his throat. They don’t have much time; at this point they have less than thirty minutes to do this.

Less than a half hour to get past *All-Might*.

Gran Torino once told him that his reverence of All-Might was only holding him back, shackling him from reaching his potential. That may very well be true, but it doesn’t budge the fact that they haven’t a chance in hell of beating the Symbol of Peace in a straight fight. His weakness doesn’t matter because thirty minutes is well within his time limit, and Izuku can only manage a fraction of One For All without basically self-destructing.

“*My* plan,” Bakugou snaps, “is for you to stop *fucking following me* so you’re not in the way when I knock him out.”

“Um. Knock out… All-Might.” Izuku has to jog to keep up with him as they make their way through the city replica. Where *is* All-Might? Ms. Nana had said she’d warn him, but it’d be nice to know where he is right now.

“I’ll lead him around by the nose ‘til the thirty minutes are almost up,” Bakugou snarls. “Catch him off guard when he’s tired.”

“Um, okay?” Disbelief momentarily muffles his nervousness around Bakugou. “Cool! Good start. Can we at least… um, workshop it? Until it’s a little less terrible?”

“Get lost already, shithead!” Bakugou bridles at him, and Izuku recoils on instinct. “If you're gonna make shitty comments while I do the real fighting then fucking do it somewhere else!”

“You’re s-smarter than this!” Izuku shoots back. “You know how strong he is! W-what makes you think less than thirty minutes of chasing you around is going to make him tired?” There was a small chance that it might, but Bakugou didn't know about the time limit, or All-Might’s weakened state.

“Deku I swear to fuck, if you don't stop fucking following me--”

Desperation overcomes him. “Y-you said so yourself, remember? W-when we were kids, you said All-Might never—”

Bakugou whips around, and his sudden grip on Izuku's shoulder is hot and sparking with tiny explosions, too small to do more than scorch Izuku's costume. With no warning, and no time to mentally prepare himself, he blanks out immediately, and his tongue goes limp and mute in his mouth.

"Don't fucking whine at me about when we were kids, you worthless mealy-mouthed piece of shit," Bakugou grits out through clenched teeth. Izuku opens his mouth to reply, but words refuse to string themselves together in his head. His mind fills with fog and cotton, protecting itself from the sharp edges of terror.

Let go let go let go please let go please don't don't ***don't***

Bakugou releases him and turns away, eyes burning with contempt. "Yeah. That's what I thought. You act like you're better than me, but all you are is a little rat afraid of his own goddamn shadow."

It's equal parts anger, frustration, and years-old resentment, thrown together and shaken into something every bit as caustic and volatile as Bakugou's quirk. Something dark and ugly wells up inside of him, choking off fear and shame.

"Well whose fault is that?" he spits back.

"You saying it's my fault you're pathetic?" Bakugou doesn't even turn his head. "Get the fuck off my case and stay out of the way, Deku. Maybe then you can be useful for once."

The last fiber of his fraying temper snaps, and he skims off the very top of a deep, deep well of long-repressed feelings. "You think I *like* being here?" Izuku bursts out, equally angry as he is desperate because time is running out and All-Might will make himself known soon and they are *running out of time* to come up with a plan that actually has a chance of working. "You think I wanted to work with you? I don't! I *didn't*! I don't trust you, I don't *like* you, and I don't have any reason to because I know you hate me, and I don't even know *why*!" His fists are so tight that his knuckles creak, and the crooked ones on his right hand ache. "But right now, we're up against All-Might, and if you stopped and *thought* for one second you'd know we can't just go after him head-on!"

There's no answer, but he can see the hard line of tension in Bakugou's shoulders, the way his fists clench at his sides as he trembles. It should have been a warning, but—there's Ms. Nana in the distance, waving to him, *time's up*—

He wants to cry, but he also really doesn't want to cry, so he yells instead. "For once in your life, would you just *listen to me, Kacchan!*"

He's half-blind with fear and frustration, his eyes sting with tears that want to be shed, and because of that, he doesn't see Bakugou move until it's already too late to get out of the way. Weighted by one of the gauntlets on his costume, Bakugou's arm swings around like the head of a flail.

The ground is flat asphalt. That's all Izuku knows for a moment because that's all he can feel. He can't see because of the bright starbursts of color bursting in his vision. But he *can* taste, and he tastes the blood trickling into his mouth. Pain shoots through his face and ricochets like a bullet through the inside of his skull, throbbing in time with his heartbeat.

"Learn to shut your fucking mouth, Deku." Bakugou's voice sounds strange through the ringing in his ears. The spots in his vision clear away, but tears replace them and turn his view of Bakugou into a wet, wavering blur. "Just sit there and cry for all I care. I don't need your shitty help." He hears the scrape of Bakugou's boots on the pavement, and then—

"*HEADS UP, KID!*"

Izuku blinks the tears from his eyes, and only has time to recoil and brace himself before a horizontal tornado of wind pressure rips through the testing facility. It misses them by a handful of paces, and even at that distance Izuku feels flattened by the blast. His limbs feel heavy, as if he's wading through deep water, but he gropes and crawls his way for the nearest cover.

Without a backward glance, Bakugou swears fluently and charges straight in the direction of the source, leaving Izuku still crouching on the cracked pavement, half hidden by a damaged building.

The previous stillness is now fragmented, first shattered by All-Might's opening attack, and now split further by the roar of Bakugou's explosions.

"Hey, kiddo? C'mon, little bean, you gotta get up—holy hell, did you get caught up in that? Toshi wasn't even aiming for you kids, he just wanted to spook you…" Ms. Nana's voice trails off, and a cool hand closes on his shoulder. He flinches. *Let go.* "Midoriya? You okay, sprout? You're looking a little lost, there. You're not concussed, are you? Oh, hey Rei, gimme a hand here."

Rei's familiar not-voice rattles and statics by his ear. He gets to his feet, stumbling a little, and the ringing in his ears finally subsides.

"Better put together a plan in that head of yours," Ms. Nana advises. "Your partner's, uh, well. He's getting his ass kicked pretty hard."

Good. The thought is immediate and viciously satisfying, for the split second before remorse crushes it. He peers out and—yeah, Bakugou's in trouble. He's charging in again and again, fists flashing with explosive power, but All-Might tosses him around effortlessly, just as Izuku knew he would. He could have told him—*did* tell him.

All-Might's pulling punches; Izuku knows he is because if he weren't then Bakugou would probably be dead, suppressor rings or no, but it's not by much.

He needs help.

The little voice that reminds him of that is so quiet now, so small, lost in the twisting pitch-black sea inside of him.

He needs help. He's in trouble and alone and hurt and maybe he's scared, too.

The little voice calls and calls, and from within that sea comes an answer.

So was I.

"Izuku?" Ms. Nana's voice cuts through the soupy fog in his head. "Clock's ticking, sprout. If you have some kind of game plan here, then you'd better act fast."

The blood stiffens as it dries, crusting over his upper lip, his mouth, his chin. He licks at it, and some of it crumbles off on his tongue.

"I know," he says. "Don't worry. I'll be fast."

Bakugou is relentless, or at least as relentless as a boy his size can be against Toshinori. Six years ago, these blows would have barely tickled, but now a few of them hit a touch too close to the wound All For One gave him, and only decades of training his self-control keep him from showing that pain on his face.

With a swift twist, he tosses Bakugou to the ground and casts about for his other student. Young Midoriya is nowhere to be seen, but that

doesn't mean anything. He's nearby; Toshinori can sense that much. But his successor is a crafty one, and possesses a healthy respect for All-Might that verges on reverence; he won't attack head-on the way Bakugou does.

Or perhaps he will; after all, that's what Toshinori least expects.

He'd be lying if he said he wasn't almost eager to see what the boy comes up with. He likes the way Midoriya surprises him.

What will you do, my boy? he thinks. *How will you think your way through this one?*

Bakugou mistakes his pensiveness for distraction, and propels himself into another nitro-fueled charge that carries him straight into Toshinori's waiting fist. When Toshinori hits him, Bakugou vomits.

It certainly brings back memories, seeing that. Once upon a time, he'd lost count of how many times Gran Torino made him spew. As a boy he'd made a vow, that if he ever took on a student, he'd never work them hard enough to make them puke.

How times have changed.

He doesn't want to, and he immediately wishes he hadn't, but Bakugou doesn't seem to respond to anything but loud and violent wake-up calls.

"You're frustrated," he says, standing back to let Bakugou finish retching. There's some distance between them; that punch drove Bakugou back by several meters. "And I understand why. You've noticed young Midoriya's growth, haven't you?" Aizawa told him about the revelation that Midoriya has been training in private with Todoroki—and happened to mention Bakugou's furious reaction to it. The boy's newfound control of his quirk probably hasn't helped. "You must know he started from a much lower level than you—you can't compare your pace that way, and it's pointless to be frustrated by someone else's efforts."

Bakugou staggers back to his feet as Toshinori closes the distance between them. He looks weary; already he's used almost as much power against Toshinori as he did over the course of the entire Sports Festival; he, too has a healthy respect for the Symbol of Peace, for all that he shows it in a different way. He doesn't answer.

"It's such a waste!" Toshinori tells him, willing him to listen, to

understand. “Instead of feeling threatened by his improvement, why not focus on your own? You have so much growing to do, boy! And not just with strength!” He’s tempted to nudge him towards teamwork; this may be an exam, but if that’s what it takes for a breakthrough, then Toshinori can’t regret telling him the answer.

This time, instead of replying, Bakugou attacks him again.

As he fends off the furious boy, Toshinori casts about once more, searching for his missing student. For all his brashness, young Midoriya has shown a hint or two of promise in the area of stealth. He’ll exercise more caution than young Bakugou, but they only have so much time to regroup and retaliate with a proper plan, if they manage it. The boy will make his move soon, or risk having his only ally be out of commission, and face the strongest hero alone.

“Where is your partner, young Bakugou?” he asks, as he swats aside an explosive punch. “Do you even know? Did you pause, even for a moment, to consider what he can offer you?”

“*Fuck that,*” Bakugou chokes out. “Like I told that lying little shitheel. I don't want another worthless victory.” He spits bile and brings his hand around for another blast, but Toshinori turns it aside with ease. “If it means having to borrow his shitty power, then I’d rather *lose*.”

As if in answer, the ringing of a distant bell echoes across the facility.

Toshinori’s head comes up, startled. Was that the signal for the end of the exams? Surely the half hour isn't over already—the boys should have had more time than that to overcome him.

Beside him, Bakugou lets out an unearthly shriek. Toshinori blocks another blast, and another and another, until Bakugou's furious barrage drives him back a step. Red eyes wild with rage, the boy throws himself at Toshinori in a reckless, desperate series of attacks.

“NO!” he roars.

“Young Bakugou—”

“GOD DAMN IT, *NO!*”

“My boy—”

“*I told him!*” Bakugou screams, as tears of rage gather in his eyes and his attacks slow, not from giving up but from pure exhaustion. “*I*

fucking told that slimy little shit! I'll kill him!"

It's for his own good; Toshinori suspects he might have cracked a few ribs with that punch, and if the boy keeps carrying on like this, then he'll only do himself serious injury. And so, as gently as he can manage, Toshinori seizes him in a sleeper hold. He's out in a matter of seconds, and Toshinori maneuvers him gently under one arm and checks the time.

There are almost twenty minutes left on the clock. Toshinori gapes at the frozen timer, speechless. He's not sure if he would have been more or less dismayed if the timer really had run out.

Because the fact that it hasn't can only mean one thing.

When he reaches the exit, the boy is waiting for him, leaning with his back against the side of the gate. He straightens when Toshinori reaches him, still with Bakugou's unconscious form cradled in one arm.

"Midoriya," he says sternly, but gets no further.

It's not that the boy interrupts him. He doesn't need to. The first thing Toshinori sees is his student's face—and his nose must be broken, for it to look like that. Dried blood covers most of it, smeared and dripping from his nose and mouth down to his chin and throat. What little skin is still visible in those areas is red with fresh bruising. And above it all, sunken green eyes stare up at him, sharp with mingled pain, fear, and defiance.

(And this all begs the question, how did young Midoriya come to look like this, when All-Might hasn't seen hide nor hair of him since before the exam started, and knows for a fact that his first smash attack was a warning shot intended to miss?

The answer, of course, ought to be obvious.)

"My boy," All-Might sighs. "It seems you've missed the point of this test."

"You're disappointed in me." The boy's voice is cold. Flat. Far too calm for the look in his eyes.

All-Might doesn't answer, but he expects that the look on his face is answer enough.

“Good.”

He blinks at his student, shocked. “Good?”

“Means it worked, didn’t it?” the boy replies, and beneath a smokescreen of nonchalance, his voice very nearly shakes. “I can’t beat you. Not without help, and—and Bakugou wouldn’t help. So I knew I’d have to trick you instead.” His throat bobs as he swallows. “Or at least I’d have to surprise you. I’d have to do something you wouldn’t expect.” He’s shaking now, staring into Toshinori’s eyes like he’s afraid of what will happen if he looks away. “And you’d never expect me to do anything to disappoint you, right?”

Something is terribly wrong.

The realization hits him abruptly, but not out of nowhere. It’s unexpected, but to Toshinori’s mind it eerily makes sense, as if it’s simply the culmination of something that’s been building just outside of his line of vision, something he’d only half-noticed before being forced to face it head-on.

He doesn’t know exactly what it is; and he wonders if he might have if he'd paid better attention.

The only thing he does know for sure is that a visit to Recovery Girl is in order. The trip is a quiet one; the shaky defiance leaves Midoriya with an abruptness that worries him, and pure exhaustion keeps Bakugou from rousing along the way. It's the exact opposite of the harrowing exercise on the second day of school; Midoriya is on his feet but tight-lipped and silent, and Bakugou is battered, exhausted, and dead to the world.

He’s done something wrong; the feeling sticks with him, as if multiple pairs of disapproving eyes are fixed on the back of his head, but when he turns around, no one is there. He's done something wrong, or at the very least he *hasn't* done something that would have been right.

It doesn't go away when they finally do get to Recovery Girl’s medical tent, because now there's a pair of disapproving eyes that he can actually see.

“I’ll see to them,” she says briskly, getting Bakugou situated on one of the empty cots.

“Has anyone else come in?” he asks. Midoriya hasn't looked him in the eye since meeting him at the gate.

“Not yet,” she replies. “You were the first to finish, though Todoroki and Yaoyorozu also completed the exam while you were on your way.” A pause, and a glance to Midoriya. “They passed. No serious injuries, but they'll also be seeing me just to be safe. Should be here shortly.”

His time runs out abruptly, his body deflates, and heavy exhaustion settles around him like a weighted blanket. Even his costume feels heavy. Tutting quietly, Recovery Girl chivvies him out of the room.

“No arguments, now,” she orders, when he's about to open his mouth to do exactly that. “Be off with you, before the other boy wakes up.” It shouldn't be so easy for such a tiny old lady to buffalo him no matter what form he happens to be using, but in spite of serious misgivings, he allows himself to be shown out.

At the door, her voice drops nearly to a whisper. “It was bad judgment,” she says.

“What?”

“Forcing those two together for something so important.” The old woman scowls. “It'll all come out once you review the footage, but if you happen to run into Aizawa, tell him I said that, would you?”

She’s gone before he can form a reply.

“Well, now that he’s squared away, let's have a look at you.”

Recovery Girl’s voice is brusquely kind as usual when she comes back from tending to Bakugou, and Izuku is impossibly grateful for it. She sits him down on a cot, all brisk business, and shines a light in his eyes. Her mouth is pinched with displeasure, but for once, Izuku knows that it isn't directed at him. Of course, knowing is different from internalizing, and therefore it doesn't stop his gut from twisting and shriveling up inside him. Rei isn’t around to reassure him; she’s standing guard over Bakugou like she doesn’t trust him to stay where he is despite being unconscious.

“Well, you aren't concussed.” The flashlight clicks off, and she puts it away and fetches a clean towel. She wets it with warm water and carefully cleans away the dried blood on his face. “Sorry for making you wait,” she continues. “I had to see to his injuries first because they were a bit more serious—and for no other reason than that, understand?” She frowns at him, and he reminds himself that that's

not a disapproving frown; it's a you-had-better-believe-me frown.

He nods.

“Any dizziness?” she asks.

He shakes his head.

“Nausea? Problems with vision?” More head-shaking. “How about breathing? Can you breathe all right?”

He pauses, then reluctantly shakes his head. He's been breathing through his mouth since Bakugou punched him.

“Hmph. I was afraid of that. Just a moment.” She stretches up and presses a quick kiss to his temple. Almost immediately the pain in his face eases, though it doesn’t vanish entirely, and she gives him a box of tissues and instructs him to blow. It’s painful and absolutely disgusting, seeing snot and congealed blood come out, but the results are swift. His face still aches, but he can breathe again. “Better?”

He nods.

“Good. I've fixed the bones and cartilage in your nose and sped up the healing process a few days on that bruising. It'll still ache a bit, and it shan’t be pretty, but it'll clear up before the week is out. And you'll get out of it without a nose like Todoroki’s.” Something pings, and she takes out a phone and checks it. “Ah, speaking of whom—just a moment.”

She walks back to the entrance to the medical tent, and returns with Yaoyorozu and Todoroki in tow, both of whom stare a little wide-eyed upon seeing him. They both look battered and worn out, though not as bad as Izuku—or Bakugou, for that matter.

“We're all right, for the most part,” Yaoyorozu tells her. “Aizawa-sensei sent us straight to you anyway, because he didn't want to give you a reason to yell at him.”

“Oh, he already has,” Recovery Girl says darkly, and Izuku twitches at the steel in her tone.

“O-oh,” Yaoyorozu says, a little awkwardly. “Well then. Hello, Midoriya—congratulations on being the first to complete the exam!”

Izuku can only nod, and try not to flinch.

“That was fast,” Todoroki remarks. “How'd it go?”

Izuku opens his mouth to reply, and after a moment he closes it. The words won't come, and he knows better than to try and force them. At best he'll only look foolish; at worst he might alarm them enough to raise questions. He would rather avoid both, so he shuts his mouth and shrugs instead. His hands fidget in his lap, itching to sign a reply, but no one in this room knows sign, so he sits on his hands to still them.

Hopefully the muteness will go away before anyone gets worried.

It doesn't take Recovery Girl long to look them over and see to their injuries, which only leaves them both even more exhausted than before. It’s going to be bed rest on school grounds for the lot of them, once she’s done her work.

“What's wrong with Bakugou?” It’s Todoroki who asks that question, and if Izuku weren’t struck mute before, then he definitely is now.

Luckily, Recovery Girl answers. “All-Might brought him in unconscious, and the healing I did took a lot out of him. He won’t wake up forquite a while, I expect.”

“Wow,” Yaoyorozu looks to Izuku through drooping eyelids. “You’ll have to tell us how yours went later, Midoriya. I mean, Aizawa-sensei was tricky enough, but fighting *All-Might*…” Her voice trails off a little before she continues. “That bruise looks pretty bad,” she says gently. “And if Bakugou’s out of commission, it must’ve gotten pretty intense.”

Izuku’s fingers curl into the edge of the cot, and the thickness in his throat turns painful.

“Would’ve thought it’d be the other way around,” Todoroki remarks, and his words are light and casual but they land like a gut punch. “Usually it’s you who comes out with the worst—Midoriya? W-wait no, I didn’t—”

Izuku doesn’t have the energy to try to stop it, or even to want to stop it. Hot tears spill unchecked down his blank, empty face, and Izuku wants to die. Being a ghost can’t possible be as bad as this—as sitting like a waste of space while all his shame and frustration boils over. It’s not the first time he’s cried in front of Todoroki, but it’s the first time he’s ever seen his friend look at him with this much alarm and confusion and instant regret, like it’s his fault Izuku is crying when it

isn't, it really isn't. It's no one's fault but his, that's he's a coward and a cheat and really the furthest thing from a hero. He should have learned the lesson that Aizawa-sensei and All-Might were trying to teach him, but all he did was lose his temper and lash out again, and it doesn't matter why he did it, because what he did was abandon someone—see someone hurt and in trouble and needing help, and turn and walk the other way *he needed help, but nobody came—*

All because Bakugou had hit him and Izuku had wanted to hit back, and that was the best way he knew how to hurt him: to spite him with another worthless victory.

As his body shudders with unvoiced sobs, a hand lands awkwardly on his shoulder, too light and hesitant to be anyone but Todoroki, who isn't fluent in physical reassurance

Izuku wishes he could feel like he deserved it.

Chapter End Notes

> CW: teacher negligence, bullying (verbal, physical), sparring taken too far.

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

GUESS WHAT LADS IT'S MORE ART

By olevaot

By grandfangarbagechan

By judgeless-rose

Two by sorryimshythings

By fingertolips

And, as always, this story has a TV Tropes page!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Toshinori walks into the faculty office with a heavy heart, he finds it mostly empty but for Aizawa slouching at his desk. The only teachers who would still be there are those in the heroics department, helping with evaluations of the practical exams. His ears still burn, raw from the tongue-lashing he got from Recovery Girl, for all that she gave it to him over an hour ago. He feels sick to… well, the empty place where his stomach used to be, at least, and Aizawa looks nearly as bad as he feels.

When he comes around to the younger hero's side, he sees why. The paused video footage on screen is of one of the practical exams. The one he proctored himself, to be exact.

Toshinori has already seen it. He's promised himself he'll sit down and watch it again once the acidic burn in his gut fades, but now might as well be the time. It seems Aizawa is stronger than him in this respect.

At the moment, Aizawa's face is mostly hidden by the hair falling over his face, and what little Toshinori can see of his eyes, isn't pretty.

"Aizawa?" He says cautiously. They have never been friends, but this, at least, warrants discussing.

Aizawa shifts in his seat, pushes one side of his hair behind his ear,

and glares at the frozen screen. For a moment Toshinori thinks he's ignoring him, and then—

“Fucked up.”

It's a mumble, on par with young Midoriya's usual *sotto voce* muttering. “Pardon?”

Aizawa sits up marginally straighter. “I fucked up,” he repeats, louder this time.

It's almost a relief to hear that, not because he enjoys hearing Aizawa take blame, but because his junior is open to discussion at all. “Ah,” Toshinori replies, and feels confident enough to nudge the nearest chair closer and sit down. “I… might as well take responsibility also —”

“No.” Aizawa laces his fingers together and glowers over the platform of his hands. “My decision, my bad judgment.” He lets out a long sigh through his nose. “You know what annoys me? I could have avoided this with one change. Just one. No other rearranging necessary.”

“How do you mean?”
The furrow in Aizawa’s brow deepens. “Midoriya and Todoroki.”

Toshinori blinks in surprise. “Really? I… hm. They get along fairly well, so they’d make a good team, but… in that case, wouldn’t that be too easy for them?” Moreover, he can’t imagine what would happen in a team-up between Yaoyorozu and Bakugou. The poor girl has been so unsure of herself lately; having to work with someone as forceful and stubborn as Bakugou would only discourage her further, wouldn’t it?

“No, that’s not—” Aizawa shakes his head. “I mean *switching* them.”

Toshinori opens his mouth to reply, then stops. And thinks.

“...Huh,” he says.

“Midoriya already has decent analytical and tactical skills,” Aizawa says. “Considering how destructive his quirk is, that’s to be encouraged, and collaborating with Yaoyorozu would both strengthen that and put her in a favorable position to assert herself.” He takes a deep breath. “Todoroki and Bakugou both rely on brute force at the expense of collaboration—pairing them against an overwhelmingly powerful opponent like you would have forced them to rethink their usual strategies.”

He falls quiet, and Toshinori nods. It makes sense; even an inexperienced teacher like him can recognize that Yaoyorozu has been struggling with self-confidence lately. Up to thirty minutes of working with young Midoriya could have cured that easily enough. “Why not choose that in the first place, then?”

Aizawa’s eyebrows knit together, and he makes a disgusted noise in the back of his throat. “Saw the animosity between Midoriya and Bakugou. Misjudged the problem. Stupid.”

He may not get along with Aizawa, but hearing the younger hero so disgusted with himself throws Toshinori for a loop. “Aizawa, I also—”

“No, shut up. I know what you're going to say, so save it.”

Undaunted, Toshinori pushes on. “Did he tell you that something was wrong?”

“He shouldn't have had to,” Aizawa gritted out. “I should have noticed without it being pointed out to me by my own students.”

“He told me.” Toshinori forces speech past the lump in his throat. “Or at least he tried.”

At this, Aizawa sits up a little straighter. “He talked to you about this? When?”

“On the way to the exam,” Toshinori admits. “He was nervous. Signing to himself again, though I couldn't tell what. I don't remember what I said, but he looked me in the eye and told me it was ‘the nightmare scenario’. I thought he was being purposely melodramatic, but…” His successor’s tired, desperate eyes flash in his memory again, and he swallows his guilt. “I underestimated things.”

“Hm.” Aizawa’s frown deepens. “And after?”

“He, ah.” It's not nice to think about. It still twists at him to remember it. “He said it was—he didn't know how to beat me, so the only way to win was to do something unexpected.” His voice turns bitter with shame. “And I would never expect him to risk disappointing me, would I?”

Aizawa’s cheekbone shifts as he clenches his teeth. “Anything else?”

“Nothing. I left him with Recovery Girl.” He hesitates, eyes his colleague, and wonders if there's a tactful way to ask his next

question. “I… take it you've spoken with her?”

The grimace on Aizawa's face tells him all he needs to know. “Asked her the same question, once she was done yelling at me.”

“And?”

“Nothing. Didn't talk to her or anyone else. Stayed silent until he left.”

Toshinori’s heart sinks further. “...Oh.”

The door swings open, and Present Mic comes strolling in, missing his jacket and absently scratching at his arms. “Shouta, quick, I need your help.”

One of Aizawa’s bloodshot eyes twitch. “*What.*”

Present Mic stumbles a little to join them, either unaware of or purposely ignoring Aizawa's dark mood. “Your students,” he almost whines, “buried me in bugs. *Bugs*, Shouta. Creepy crawly death dealers. I can't stop feeling tiny little legs *all over me.*” He shudders deeply. “I think I got all of them, but can you help me check?”

“Yamada,” Toshinori sighs. “Now really isn't the time.”

“Oh. You guys busy?” Yamada sobers almost instantly, though he still twitches a little. He catches sight of the screen. “Oh hey, test footage. Figuring out feedback, or what?” Thankfully, he seems to read the silence that follows, and his face falls. “Oh. Uh… so I’m a little afraid to ask, but what happened with Midoriya this time?”

Toshinori looks at him sharply. “How do you know it has to do with Midoriya?”

“Couple reasons. I saw him before he left campus, and he looked pretty rough. He usually stutters a little whenever he has the chance to say goodbye to me, which is both flattering and adorable, but he didn’t say two words to me today.” Toshinori shifts uncomfortably. “Mostly the look on your face, though. No offense, All Might, but you worry about him more than the rest of the class put together. Not that I blame you at all, considering what he gets up to if you don't keep an eye on him, but you're worse than a single mother with that kid.” He pulls up a chair to get a comfortable view of Aizawa's monitor screen. “So what's up?”

Instead of answering, Aizawa starts up the footage.

There's no audio, but there doesn't need to be. The video footage shows the pair at the beginning of the exam, Bakugou storming through the testing ground and pointedly ignoring Midoriya as he rushes to keep up. It's plain that Midoriya is trying to communicate, but Bakugou isn't listening.

The conversation, such that it is, gets more heated as Midoriya gets desperate and frustrated while Bakugou continues to brush him off. Midoriya's hands twist at his sides in familiar ways—

“Hold on, is he signing?” Yamada leans forward for a better look.

“You recognize it?” Toshinori asks.

“All-Might, you're talking to the guy who spent his entire childhood trying not to knock down his house with a shouty quirk he couldn't always control. Yeah, I know sign.” He squints. “Kinda garbled, though. And it's a bad angle. Something about finding the exit fast—probably putting together his own plan, since it doesn't look like his partner is interested in working with him. Oh man, is this him doing the mumble thing, but in sign? That's adorable.”

And then, of course, the inevitable scene arrives. Whatever Midoriya says to him, Bakugou doesn't want to hear it.

Yamada cringes when Bakugou’s swing makes contact. “Oh. Okay, I see why you two are in a mood.”

Aizawa stops the video. “That's not the part that concerns me the most; it’s this.” He plays back the previous minute, before Bakugou lashes out. At one point, Bakugou turns to face him and grabs his arm, and Midoriya—

Midoriya freezes. He stops moving, stops talking, doesn't even try to resist or get away. He stops, and even after Bakugou lets go, it takes him a moment to move again.

“Not a good sign,” Yamada remarks. “Has that ever happened before?”

“Not that I’ve seen. They haven't been paired up for training since day two.” Aizawa finally closes the video. “They've avoided each other since then, and I assumed it was just a mutual grudge they needed to get over.” His jaw tightens, and he rises from his seat. “I'll see you two tomorrow.”

Toshinori lets him go without a word, and soon takes his leave as

well. He has quite a bit to think about.

“I’m leaving for school, Mom.”

When she hears this, she takes him in her arms and holds him long enough to risk making him late. Izuku lets her without complaint, knowing he probably scared her; until now, he hasn’t spoken to her with his mouth instead of his hands since yesterday. Whenever he goes quiet, it reminds her of things they would both rather forget. She finally lets him go, and he and Rei leave the house at a run to make up for lost time.

“Hey, Deku!” He catches up to Uraraka before he reaches UA’s front gate; usually it's the other way around. “You’re a little later than usual aren't—oh, that doesn't look good.” Her good-morning cheer gives way to instant concern. Privately, Izuku wonders if he could have gotten away with wearing a face mask today. Recovery Girl fixed his nose as good as new and jump-started the healing for his bruised face, but that only means that the marks look days old instead of fresh. Even Morino commented on his appearance in the bathroom mirror; from nose to chin, his face is a dark, blotchy purple-green.

Does he have time to run to the nurse? Beg one more healing off of her?

“That’s to be expected, considering your opponent,” and Izuku jumps, because Iida's suddenly *right there* which means Tensei is also *right there*, and a little warning would have been nice. “All-Might certainly didn't go easy on you, did he?”

Izuku stares at him, nonplussed. Iida thinks All-Might did this to him. Iida thinks Izuku spent any time whatsoever actually fighting All-Might.

“I don't think any of the teachers did,” Uraraka says. “Aoyama and I almost didn't pass at all!” She winces. “Actually, we *technically* went over the time limit, but since we still got the handcuffs on Thirteen, we passed anyway.”

“It was a close fight in my case as well, but Ojiro and I managed to pull through quite successfully,” Iida replies. “Still, I was pleasantly surprised when they announced your victory, Midoriya. Congratulations on being the first.”

“Yeah!” Uraraka bounces on her toes. “You've gotta tell us how you

pulled that off—fastest win in class, up against the number one! *And* you were working with Bakugou."

"We'll have plenty of time to trade stories later," Iida says, and Izuku sighs with relief as his stomach churns. "We're already a bit late—oh, good morning, Todoroki."

"Morning."

Izuku focuses on the ground at his feet. He can feel eyes on him—Todoroki's eyes, studying him, probably remembering the last time they saw each other.

"Are you all right?" Todoroki asks.

For a moment his tongue and throat lock up, and Izuku fears that his goodbye to his mother was a fluke, that the muteness will stretch to weeks and months again. But he swallows in spite of his dry mouth, and tries again. "Fine," he mumbles. "Just slept a lot, because of the healing."

"Ah," Todoroki replies, and Izuku hurries into the building before he can attract any more questions.

Final exams are the talk of the classroom, naturally. Izuku keeps his head down and weaves through his classmates, desperate to avoid notice. Kaminari, looking emotionally worse for wear, approaches him with what might be congratulations, but Rei bares her teeth and hisses, exuding fear in a noxious cloud, and it's enough to make his classmate change his mind.

Gradually, over the minutes before the start of class, he hears the results of the rest of the exams. It's not that he's trying to listen. But the talk is all around him, so it's impossible not to absorb it.

Todoroki and Yaoyorozu: escaped Aizawa together. Passed.

Tsuyu and Tokoyami: defeated and handcuffed Ectoplasm. Passed.

Jirou and Kouda: escaped Present Mic together. Passed.

Mineta and Sero: escaped Midnight together. Passed.

Uraraka and Aoyama: defeated and handcuffed Thirteen. Passed.

Shouji and Hagakure: defeated and handcuffed Snipe. Passed.

Iida and Ojiro: escaped Power Loader together. Passed.

Ashido, Kaminari, Kirishima, and Satou were the only ones who failed the practical exam.

A heavy pit had settled in Izuku's chest at some point after he left Recovery Girl, and now it weighs even further on his heart. He puts his head down on his desk, cushions his chin on one arm, and prays that no one will approach him. The results speak for themselves.

Everyone else pulled together—not him. Everyone else stayed with their partners and faced daunting odds as a pair, as a team—not him. Everyone else was clever or daring or determined or some combination of all three—not him. Everyone else struggled and sweated and fought for their victory—*not him, not him, not him*.

In every other team, they either triumphed together, or they didn't triumph at all.

It isn't possible for him to sink any lower in his chair, but he tries. Rei's aura bleeds fear and unease as she crouches over him, and his classmates avoid his desk without quite realizing why. And Izuku is so wrapped up in his nerves and shame and heavy, aching guilt that he forgets. He forgets where he is, and he forgets one inevitable fact.

"Bakugou, heya!" Kirishima's voice carries through the entire classroom, and Izuku's pulse stops dead in his chest. "Man, congrats on finishing the exam so fast! How'd you and Midoriya pull that off —?"

Izuku knows what's coming, deep in his most basic instincts, thanks to years of habits and patterns drilled into his head. It's enough of a warning to shove himself up off his desk and back, as far back as he can go before his shoulders slam into the seat behind him.

He's not sure what causes the ringing in his ears, whether it's Bakugou's hands slamming onto the surface of his desk or the accompanying explosion that blackens the wood—and isn't this distantly familiar, an old panic-trigger that he hasn't seen since middle school, a lifetime ago—

"Deku, you *slimy little shit!*" And just like that, the past months haven't happened, there's no UA, no One For All, no All-Might or Aizawa-sensei or Nana, and Midoriya Izuku has no quirk and no friends except the ones whose hearts don't beat anymore, the ones who can cry out with rage but can't protect him. Bakugou is there again, inches away

with fire and thunder at his fingertips, and Izuku can only shrink back and cower and freeze blank and empty because at least when he's empty he doesn't feel like the Deku whose name means *useless, weak, crazy, look at him shake, watch me make the quirkless creep cry like a little girl*

There are tears in Bakugou's eyes, anger and frustration making him weep with rage. "I told you not to get in my way! I told you I was gonna win it right, and you *fucked it up again!*"

Panic howls through his veins, and he waits for pain, for burning, for smoke and thunder, but instead there's a pitiful pop and then silence, and the coils of a scarf whip around Bakugou with an audible snap, and Izuku looks through darkening tunnel vision to find red, red eyes.

Not Bakugou's eyes, Eraserhead's eyes, bloodshot scarlet and cold and furious

Their teacher yanks Bakugou back, slamming him down into his seat, and no teacher has ever done that before—stopped Bakugou cold, stopped his anger and his quirk and even his voice, gagging him before more poison words can scald Izuku's ears.

And just like that the danger is past, and a roomful of eyes stare and stare and don't look away. If anyone speaks then Izuku can't hear it past the cotton wool in his ears and the high-pitched whining tone echoing in his brain. He pumps the brakes on his roaring panic, because homeroom is only ten minutes and he needs *time*. But it's just like Sachi's car, that mangled steel corpse left to rust on the beach—the lines are cut and Izuku is going to crash.

He breathes in, filling his lungs just enough to spit *CanIbeexcused* in a half-coherent stream, and waits for Aizawa-sensei's nod before he weaves through the desks and hurries to the door. He makes it to the hallway before the classroom becomes too small to let him breathe.

Cold, willing hands tug at him, guide him, pull him along—blank white eyes surround him, soft with pity as their owners whisper reassurances that skim uselessly off the shell of terror around his heart. Tensei—he thinks it's Tensei, and maybe the other one's Narita—leads him somewhere, and he follows. The last time this happened, he was in the hospital, fleeing to a bathroom so that he could break without anyone witnessing it. He follows their lead as they herd him along, hoping they find somewhere fast, because he doesn't have much time before—

Half-blind, he runs straight into someone—warm and solid, a living person who catches him by the shoulders before he can fall over.

“Young Midoriya?”

No no no not him anyone but him why didn’t they warn me

He opens his mouth to speak, but all that comes out is a strangled noise.

There are hands guiding him along again—All-Might’s hands, this time. The ghosts are still there, just beyond his reach. A door closes behind him, and when his legs finally quake out from under him, a sofa is there to catch him.

“Breathe,” someone says close to his ear. Not All-Might—Tensei? Narita? He can’t keep track anymore. He counts in his head, tapping along with a finger on his knee—too fast, seconds aren’t that fast, but it helps. It helps.

When the tunnel vision clears and he comes back into himself, there are hands on his. He’s already gripping them, and loosens his fingers with a whispered *sorry*.

“Are you all right?” All-Might asks him.

Izuku nods until his teeth rattle, fighting against the pressure building in his throat. This is the first time he’s spoken with All-Might, the first time he’s *looked* at him since after the exam, and his mentor found him like *this*. He looks to the ghosts, finds Tensei watching him, and stares back with pleading eyes.

“Sorry, Midoriya,” Iida’s brother says softly. “But… you need to not be alone right now.”

“Don’t blame him, kiddo,” Ms. Nana murmurs from somewhere by All-Might’s shoulder. “When I saw them leading you off, I asked them to bring you to him. You need to talk to him about what happened out there.”

His eyes burn, and he shuts his eyes before the tears can come—not yet. His throat feels blocked again, filtering air through but leaving words locked tight inside of him.

I’m sorry, he signs, and it’s not like his indistinct, furtive signing with Rei. He shapes the phrase carefully with his hands. It’s a simple one, a

basic one, and one of the first he happened to show All-Might.

“You have nothing to be sorry for.” All-Might’s hand settles upon his shoulder, warm and reassuring. “Did something happen in class?”

Yes. His hands shake, and he switches from signing to finger-spelling. It’s slower, but it’s easier for All-Might to understand if he sounds it out than it is for Izuku to try to express himself with the limited sign he’s shown him up to now. *I couldn't do what you wanted,* he says, slowly, one syllable at a time. *Or I could, but I didn't try. I gave up so fast. I couldn't win the way I wanted.* Tears trickle down his face, and he ducks his head so he can't look All-Might in the eye. *I'm sorry I disappointed you.*

All-Might watches, reading each sound as he gradually ekes out the words. “No—no, my boy.” Izuku drops his hands into his lap, and All-Might grips his shoulder until he raises his head again. “I'm not disappointed in you. I'm not upset with you at all.”

His disbelief must show on his face. Without breaking eye contact, All-Might gives a gentle shake of his head. “I wasn't listening to you. You tried to tell me, in your own way, that you needed help, and I didn't listen.”

Izuku gapes at him, wide-eyed and disbelieving, because—no he didn't, did he? He made a stupid joke but other than that he kept his mouth shut. All-Might was strong, stronger than anyone else, but he wasn't a mind reader.

Words are still hard, but at least his face is apparently an open book. “One of the marks of a good hero,” All-Might says quietly, “is knowing when something is wrong without needing to be told. And I'm finding, now, that the same can be said of teachers—only it's a very different type of ‘wrong’ that I have to look out for.” He pauses, looks away for a moment, and continues. “When I let the exam continue when you were clearly uncomfortable with it, that was… that was wrong of me. As your teacher, you deserved better from me.”

Izuku can only stare at him, at a loss for words. It's just like All-Might to let his Symbol-Of-Peace habits color his teaching methods, chasing and worrying over every hint of someone else’s distress. Izuku isn't ungrateful for it, but it still fills him with warm embarrassment. He’s supposed to be the next symbol of peace, isn't he? This is a school for heroes; he shouldn't have to be coddled.

He twitches and bites back a yelp when someone pinches him sharply

on the arm. He looks down, and Rei glares up at him. *Stop that.*

Izuku resists the temptation to scowl. Trust Rei to be overprotective.

“Can I ask you a question?” All-Might says. “It’s kind of personal, but just yes or no is fine.” Izuku looks at him again, swallowing his nervousness. All-Might frowns. “You told me once, quite a while ago, that you went through a shy phase, and that’s what made you learn sign language.” Izuku’s throat seizes, and he shakily nods. “Mm. That phase have anything to do with young Bakugou?”

His eyes are glued to the floor now. It would be easy, so easy, to shake his head and move on. But at this point… would there be any point in trying to hide it?

Izuku offers one more jerky nod.

He doesn’t look up at All-Might’s face, but he hears the noncommittal little hum. “Are you all right to go back to class?” All-Might asks, and Izuku sighs with relief. “If you’d like to stay longer…”

Izuku shakes his head and finally lifts his hands from his lap again. *I'm fine.*

All-Might looks skeptical, of course, but Izuku gets to his feet before his mentor can press the issue. If he hurries, he can catch the last few minutes of homeroom. Aizawa-sensei probably isn't happy about the exam either, much less the mess this morning with Bakugou, and Izuku would rather not give him any more reasons to frown on him.

“You okay?” Tensei asks, as the classroom ghosts follow him back. Izuku nods stiffly. There are only three or so minutes left before next period; on the bright side, that means he’ll only have to endure Aizawa-sensei’s disapproval for that long.

Tensei and Narita vanish well before Izuku gets to the door—Tensei’s eager to get back to his brother, and Narita gets bored easily when there isn’t a crisis. Rei stays close, and Izuku braces himself before nudging the door open.

Heads turn to look as he steps back in, which is jarring but inevitable. Izuku swallows uncomfortably as he steps in, looking instinctively to his own scorched desk, and in particular the one in front of it.

He blinks.

Uraraka blinks back, looking equally as bewildered as he feels, which makes sense because she's sitting in Bakugou's desk. Bakugou is nowhere to be seen.

Izuku looks to Uraraka's old seat as he passes it on the way to his own, just out of curiosity, and finds Bakugou's bag shoved under the chair, and a piece of paper fixed to the desk with a bit of tape.

tantrum-throwing baby jail, it reads. From the desk next to it, Satou grins and flashes him a thumbs up.

Izuku hurries the rest of the way to his seat.

Homeroom ends not long after Midoriya returns. Aizawa considers it a minor miracle that the entire class didn't descend upon him as one the second he opened the door.

"You're all dismissed. Please save pressing conversations for when you're outside of my classroom."

Midoriya skirts around the outside of the desks, slowly so that he stays behind the bulk of the crowd. His path takes him closer to Aizawa's desk than it would have, had he taken a straighter route, and his pace quickens as he tries to hurry to the door.

"Not you," Aizawa says, and for a split second Midoriya looks like someone facing the gallows.

Uraraka, who was sticking close to him up to that point, gives him a sympathetic look. "Want us to wait?" Midoriya shakes his head and gives her a grin, and she reluctantly follows the rest of the class out. The room empties, leaving Midoriya standing awkwardly in front of Aizawa's desk.

"Sit down," Aizawa sighs, because the boy looks ready to tip over.

"I'm sorry," Midoriya blurts out instead of sitting. "I-I know you were trying to teach me something with the exam but I just g-gave up instead of actually trying to learn anything and I *know* I messed up and I could have done so much better b-but I didn't a-and… it's fine if you fail me or I have to retake it. I-it's fine. I understand."

Well, Aizawa thinks wryly. At least he's talking again. Out loud, he says, "At least lean on the desk behind you if you're not gonna sit down. You look like you're about to fall over." Hesitantly Midoriya

obeys. He grips the edge of the desk and stares at the floor, and Aizawa huffs out a sigh. “My intentions with the exam were to address the animosity between you and Bakugou, while also hammering out some of the other bad habits you both have been showing. The Sports Festival showed me that you both are decent strategists capable of collaborating in teams—just not with each other.” He pauses. “My assumption at the time was that this was a problem you both had to work to fix. On top of that, I had hoped that being forced to work for victory with someone he holds in contempt might teach Bakugou a little humility.”

Midoriya winces. Aizawa takes another deep breath.

“And for that, I owe you an apology.”

Deathly silence falls in the empty classroom. Slowly, Midoriya raises his head and stares at Aizawa as if he spoke that last part in Welsh.

“Midoriya, you are a student,” Aizawa continues, before the boy has the chance to launch into another apologetic tirade. “Your responsibilities at this school are to learn, grow, do your homework, and try not to screw up. And that's on *you*. Your learning, your growth, your homework, and your screw-ups. No one else’s.” He hesitates again, gritting his teeth, because he hasn't had to eat crow in front of a student since back when he was a rookie teacher. “I misjudged the history between you two. And by doing that, I made your growth a tool to further Bakugou’s, which I shouldn't have done.”

“But—” Midoriya breaks in. “But it's not just—heroes have to do that, don't they? Collaborate with other heroes even if they don't get along? I can't—I couldn't leave people in the lurch just because—”

“Your classmate's poor behavior is not your responsibility.” Midoriya startles when Aizawa interrupts him. “And fixing it is *my* job. Trying to shovel some of that headache on you was unprofessional.”

Midoriya shrinks in on himself. “But… didn't I sort of just make it worse? And even if it's not my responsibility, what about the test?”

Aizawa raises an eyebrow at him. “What about it?”

“I mean… I didn't really…”

“I believe the testing parameters were quite clear, Midoriya.”

“But—”

Aizawa is tempted to ban him from beginning sentences with that word. “Only one of you was required to escape the testing ground in order to pass. You fulfilled that requirement. We have it on tape and everything.”

“But I gave up!” Midoriya looks desperately confused. “I—I just l-left him, I abandoned my teammate and in real life… w-why are you just letting it slide?”

Aizawa takes a while to answer, partly to give his student a chance to calm down, but mostly to take a good, long look at him. He started this awkward discussion expecting a sigh of relief at the end, a thank-you stammered out before Aizawa could wave it off, maybe an embarrassed little bow. But here's Midoriya arguing with him, piling blame on his own shoulders and refusing to accept that he isn't the one that screwed up this time.

Besides which…

“Midoriya, what happened when you passed through that gate?”

The question gets him a startled blink. “Um… the bell rang?”

“Meaning what?”

“Th-the exam ended. And I… passed.”

“Meaning what?” Aizawa presses.

Midoriya frowns in confusion. “Um… All-Might showed up? With… with Bakugou…” He blinks, and Aizawa sees realization dawn. “The fight stopped.”

Aizawa nods. “Regardless of the difference between a test and real life, you had a difficult situation before you, and you dealt with it. The course of action you chose prevented further conflict between you and your teammate, ended the conflict with your opponent, and prevented further injury to your partner.” He pauses to make sure it's sinking in. “We were grading for judgment just as much as strength or skill. You're not invincible nor infallible, and you went for the most reasonable outcome, and that, Midoriya, is why I'm ‘letting it slide.’ Because doing otherwise would be punishing you for Bakugou's poor decisions. Or worse, I would be punishing you for *mine*.”

Midoriya blinks twice more. Tears gleam in his eyes, threatening to overflow, and a moment later they aren’t just threatening anymore.

Aizawa averts his gaze to give his student some cursory sense of privacy, and waits until the sniffling dies down before he pushes forward one last time.

“How long has Bakugou been bullying you?”

His student startles again, wiping hastily at his eyes. “I-It's not—he…” Whatever lie he was preparing quickly sputters out. The floor draws his eyes again. “Um. F-five years, I guess.”

“Since the fourth grade, then?”

“N-no, I mean…” Midoriya fidgets. “Five years, um, cumulatively. It started when we were five, after… after our quirks came in. And then when I was seven I switched schools and didn’t see him again until middle school.”

“Hm.” Aizawa nods. He takes out a slip of paper, jots down a quick note and his signature, and slides it across to Midoriya. “Here. Get going.”

Midoriya takes it. “What’s this?”

Aizawa raises an eyebrow again. “It’s a late note,” he says. “Show that to Cementoss so he won’t mark you down.”

“O-oh. Thanks.” Midoriya looks like he’s about to cry again—and really, it’s just a *late note*.

Aizawa gives a slow blink. “Get to class, Midoriya.”

“Yes, Sensei!” Midoriya nearly knocks over a desk in his scramble for the door, and Aizawa sits back and considers how to proceed.

“I want a do-over.”

Aizawa’s forehead twinges, the warning sign of a stress headache. He opens his eyes to find the classroom emptied out, students gone for the day—all except one.

Bakugou scowls at him over the desk, less angry than simply sullen, hunched over with his hands shoved in his pockets in a pose that looks simultaneously indifferent and defiant.

“What was that?” Aizawa asks. He stirs subtly in his chair, going from relaxed to ready in a single shift of muscles.

“I said I want a do-over,” Bakugou snaps. “Let me re-take the exam.”

“The practical exams were graded pass or no pass, Bakugou,” Aizawa says evenly. “And you passed. There’s nothing for you to make up.”

“It was bullshit and you know it!” Bakugou’s hand hits the desktop with a dull thud. He doesn’t slam or pound it, and his palms don’t give off a single spark. The kid’s being polite. “I passed on a *fucking* technicality, so how about you actually *test* me without Deku fucking everything up?”

Aizawa clasps his hands loosely in front of him, lacing the fingers together into a small bridge. He considers the boy in front of him through narrow eyes.

“Is this how it usually goes?” he asks.

Bakugou blinks, squinting in confusion. “What?”

“You make demands, shout them loud enough, throw a tantrum until you get what you want? Is that how you deal with teachers?” Aizawa pauses. “Is that how you expect to deal with me?” The note of danger in his voice is gentle compared to what villains get, and Aizawa carefully controls it as it trickles into his voice.

The result is clear; Bakugou bridles, but for once he keeps a leash on his temper. Or at least what passes for a leash, with him. “I’m not throwing a tantrum!” he barks. “I just want—”

“Speaking of what you want,” Aizawa breaks in. “Tell me something, Bakugou.” He meets his student’s eyes and holds them. “Why do you want to become a hero?”

“What—” Bakugou bites down on what is clearly another budding tirade. “The fuck? What does that have to do with anything?”

“Humor me. Why do you want to become a hero?”

Bakugou scowls, clenches his hands into white-knuckled fists. “Because I want to win. I want to be the strongest—the *best*. And I want everyone to know it.”

“That doesn’t answer the question,” Aizawa says.

“What do you mean that doesn’t—”

“You want to win, you want to be the best, you want to be the

strongest, but that doesn't tell me why you want to be a hero." Slowly Aizawa sits up straighter. "Why not be a professional martial artist, then? Why not join the armed forces? Look into cage matches? Why not spend your days wandering the city, picking fights with everyone who looks at you funny?" He lets the full force of his glare pour into Bakugou's eyes. "Why not be a villain?"

Slam. "Fuck you!" Bakugou forgets his manners then. He's not stupid enough to use his quirk, but this time Aizawa feels the desk reverberate with the force of the blow. "Where the *fuck* do you get off calling me a villain!"

"Where do you get off calling yourself a potential hero?" Aizawa asks. "Anything I just listed off would give you the chance to prove your strength, to prove yourself stronger than those around you—the last one especially. So why do you want to be a hero?"

Bakugou stares at him, red eyes blazing, speechless with fury.

"What I *hope*," Aizawa continues, "is that somewhere, deep down, there's some part of you, some deep, buried instinct, that points you to the side of the angels. That some part of you, no matter how small, wants to do good. I hope, for the sake of your position at this school, that I'm not wrong."

This time, Aizawa sees a flinch. It's not much, but it's there, and the self-righteous fury in his student's eyes starts to crack, just a little. "What's that supposed to mean."

"First of all, it doesn't mean I'm going to expel you," Aizawa says. "You're an arrogant, headstrong, immature teenager, and at this point you need guidance more than you need a punishment that final. What it does mean… well. You're strong, and you're talented, and you have a powerful quirk. So tell me, Bakugou—when was the last time you used any of those gifts for someone else's benefit?" Bakugou blinks. "When was the last time you helped someone in need? Fought for something that wasn't your own ego? When was the last time you risked an injury, for no other reason than to prevent someone else from doing the same?"

By this point, Bakugou is shaking—with rage or something else, Aizawa can't be sure. All he can do is hope that some of this is sinking in.

"Does that matter to you, at all?" Aizawa asks. "Has it occurred to you even once that the most important aspect of being a hero is to protect

those weaker than yourself?"

He can hear Bakugou's knuckles popping from here, the boy's clenching his fists so tight.

"I don't know how your teachers have dealt with you in the past," Aizawa says flatly. "And frankly, I don't care. For what it's worth, I don't think this is entirely your fault—you're used to getting your way because no one has ever bothered to tell you no, and that's on them. But I learn from my mistakes, and from the mistakes of those who came before me, so I'm telling you, right now: no. No, you may not re-take the exam. You'll stick with the results you have, and receive extra attention this summer to fix the plethora of problems I saw in your performance."

He rises from his seat, and Bakugou's shaking stills as he makes his way around the desk to stand in front of his student. "You'll also be starting the next term with a four-day suspension, for assaulting a classmate and damaging school property. And I will be watching your progress, to make sure you learn the right lessons and un-learn your bad habits." He stoops a little, until they're eye to eye. "Let me be clear, Bakugou. Here at UA, we train heroes. I am not interested in teaching combat skills to a bully—or worse, giving one a license to use his quirk freely. I am not interested in teaching a student who doesn't seem to realizing that treating the people around him as stepping stones and garbage makes him *utterly unworthy* of standing alongside them.' Bakugou tenses. It looks more like a flinch. "I will do my best with you, Bakugou, but I need you to work with me. So shape up and learn from this, or there really is nothing I can do to help you."

"Learn *what*." Bakugou's voice is quieter, but still sharp and scraping and burning with shame and resentment.

"You can start with this exam," Aizawa says, straightening again. "If you're worried that you couldn't learn anything, then here's a lesson you can take from it: people have limits, Bakugou. Even the kindest, most patient people have limits, and you managed to hit Midoriya's the other day, didn't you?" This time Bakugou really does flinch. "Heroes are human. They're fallible. And like every other human being on the planet, they can be pushed too far. So if you need a reason to fix your behavior, here's one: one day in the future, you'll find yourself in the same position you did the other day, only it won't be make-believe. You'll be up against enemies who are stronger than you, more prepared, more deadly." Aizawa locks eyes with him one last time. "And how you treat your allies can be the difference

between having help, and being utterly alone."

Bakugou tries to hold his gaze. It's a valiant effort, but after a few seconds his chin drops, and he stares at the floor with watery eyes.

Izuku's hands are in Ms. Morino's hair, helping her pin up a complicated up-do, when his phone buzzes and Morino's hair ends up hopelessly snarled.

"Ah, beans," Morino says. "This isn't working. Go ahead and answer that, Midoriya, we can try this again later." She vanishes without another word.

There isn't much to do, with the term over. There's no homework, of course, and with a summer training camp in their future, there's little more he can do but pack, text his friends, and let the excitement build.

He checks his messages, and finds a new one from Kirishima.

[4:18] Kirishima:
Heya Midoriya! So me and some of the others are gonna get together and hang out this weekend before we leave for camp and I was wondering if you wanted to come?

His phone pings with another message.

[4:20] Kirishima:
Oh and uh. Bakugou's not coming. It's really not his thing and also some of the others told me what happened in study group. Sorry I wasn't there, that was super not cool of him :(

In spite of himself, Izuku can't help but smile.

[4:22] Kirishima:
But anyway if you want to come with, that'd be pretty cool. There's

this sweet shopping mall in Kiyashi Ward with some great stores. I'm thinking we can buy some awesome supplies to bring to camp, you know?
So what do you say?

Mika springs up onto the bathroom counter, and Izuku obligingly scratches her ears as he sends his response.

[4:22] Me:
sounds like fun! count me in.

Chapter End Notes

CW: Bullying (verbal, physical intimidation), panic attack, discussions of teacher negligence, discussions of past bullying.

Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

AAARRRRT

By Biteitwhenitssoft

By Meteorblazes

By Okamianne

By Zondernaamtales

By Swiggity-swexual

By Anekoforme

And, as always, this story has a TV Tropes page!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"—and I don't know, I just… that was it, for me."

Izuku stares up at the sky, feeling the grass tickle at the back of his neck. The clouds move slowly above him, thin and wispy in the early summer. His back itches, from the grass or the damp shirt pressed against his back, but he doesn't move. His mouth feels dry, even though he just took a drink.

"I-I'm not—it wasn't just—" He tries to continue, but he just can't find a good way to say it. "I weighed my options. Or… I tried to, at least. A-and I thought of a couple ideas to win, o-or at least… the beginnings of ideas. But they all—they all depended on getting Bakugou to work with me, and I just didn't know how to do that. Because I already tried, and I didn't—" *I didn't want him to hit me again*. He doesn't say that. It's too embarrassing to admit that allowed, especially in the company he's currently keeping. "I couldn't figure it out, and I knew I only had so much time before All-Might came looking for me. So I left. Bakugou went to try and fight All-Might, and I went straight to the gate."

There's no answer for a while. Izuku can imagine what Uraraka might

say, or Iida. They would reassure him and sympathize, whether or not they really approved—Uraraka would side with him for sure, and Iida might point out that they, of all people, ought to know the good sense in running from a hopeless fight. But Iida and Uraraka aren't here right now. His classmates decided to give "study group" another try after summer break, to give Iida time to organize their ground rules, if nothing else. So it's just him and Todoroki again, like it used to be, and how he'll take this is anyone's guess.

Sympathy isn't Todoroki's strong suit. Izuku can see how much he struggles with putting that sort of thing on display, and that his experiences have left him with lopsided standards for what is and isn't acceptable. Besides that, he has over ten years of punching bag treatment to Izuku's five, and he still finds the strength to face Endeavor every day.

So maybe Izuku could have picked a better sympathetic ear among his school friends, but Todoroki is here and trustworthy and Izuku could do a lot worse, too.

"Do you think less of me?" He tries to keep his voice neutral, as if he's commenting on the shape of the clouds.

"No," Todoroki answers readily enough.

It's so immediate and characteristically blunt that "Really?" slips out before Izuku can think of an actual response.

He can hear Todoroki shifting in the grass, uncrossing his legs to keep his feet from falling asleep. "Did you expect me to?"

"N-no?" It comes out too hesitant for Izuku to simply brush it off. "Maybe. I don't know. I guess I thought it'd take you longer to decide, if the answer was no." He hesitates, swallowing in the hopes of dealing with his dry throat. "So you don't think I should have stuck it out?"

"That's not what you asked," Todoroki replies.

Izuku cranes his neck to look at him. "It isn't?"

"I don't know what your situation is, or why you and Bakugou don't get along," Todoroki tells him. "If you think you could have done better, then that's fine. You know better than I do. But you asked me if I thought less of you for it, and I don't."

“I could have done more,” Izuku admits.

“Then do more, next time,” Todoroki replies, simple as that. He pauses, and Izuku finally shifts over to see his friend sitting with his knees to his chest, picking at the grass at his feet. “Though—” He hesitates again. “You were the one who told me that avoiding things that hurt you isn't weakness, weren't you?”

“Only if I have a choice—”

“You did,” Todoroki says. “So did Bakugou, and he made it. Not your fault it was a crap choice.”

Izuku huffs out a laugh and sits up, wincing when cool air touches his back. “Yeah, it was a pretty terrible plan.”

“I wouldn't go that far. Technically it worked.”

At this, Izuku jerks his head around to stare at him in confusion. “Huh?”

“You said his plan was to lead All-Might around by the nose while you stayed out of the way,” Todoroki points out. “I don't see why he’s so upset—you followed his plan exactly, and it worked.”

Izuku laughs. It starts as a surprised little short, and in the next moment he's curling over and wheezing a little because honestly, he never thought of it that way. It's not a justification that Bakugou would ever accept, not in a million years, but Izuku will take it. And it’s consolation coming from Todoroki, which somehow makes it mean more.

“Ready to go again?” Todoroki asks, once he’s done.

“Sure, gimme a second.” Izuku retrieves his water bottle for one more drink. “Just a couple more rounds, I think. I don't want to be too tired for tomorrow.”

Todoroki blinks at him for a moment before he seems to remember. “Ah. You're taking Kirishima up on his invitation?”

“Yeah.” Izuku allows himself an excited little grin. “I don't think I've ever hung out at the mall with friends before.”

“Oh,” Todoroki says awkwardly, and Izuku remembers that Todoroki probably hasn’t hung out at the mall with friends before, either. “Well,

have fun."

"You're not coming?" Izuku tries not to sound too crestfallen.

"It's my last chance to visit my mother before we leave," Todoroki explains, and the apologetic tone in his voice makes Izuku feel unreasonable and whiny.

"Oh, I'm glad," he says, and he's not sure of there's a tactful way to say *Sorry if my need for validation makes you feel like you have to apologize for taking the time to further repair your relationship with your mom,* but he's sure that if he tries to find it, he'll only embarrass both of them.

Luckily, tact isn't a requirement for launching the first punch in a sparring match. Sometimes the nice things in life don't require words.

The Kiyashi Ward mall is even cooler than Eijirou expected.

To start with, it's *massive*. When they say it has the most shops of any mall in the prefecture, they aren't kidding. Eijirou wouldn't be surprised if it has more shops than the rest of them put together. He counts at least four distinct levels, and they're all pretty jam-packed. Not that that's much of a surprise; it's the start of summer, and this place is a pretty sweet hangout for kids getting out of school.

Holy *hell* is he glad to be here. Thank god for Aizawa-sensei and his logical ruses.

Almost the whole class is here—Kaminari, Ashido, and Satou are especially psyched, and so is Eijirou. Iida's already trying in vain to corral everyone into something resembling order, but the mall is crowded and everyone's hearing the siren call of the surrounding shops, food stands, and kiosks. Eijirou already has his sights set on something to buy, but he's not quite ready to run off just yet. He does a quick sweep of the area to see if anyone else is showing up. It looks like not everybody who said they were coming made it, which is a shame. He was really hoping to talk to—

"Hey, Kirishima."

He startles in place, and looks over his shoulder to find Midoriya standing there as if he's been there the entire time. "Oh hey, dude! I was wondering if you were gonna make it."

"Wouldn't miss it." Midoriya smiles back, but there's a nervousness in

his face that Eijirou can't deny.

"You okay?" Eijirou steps closer and lowers his voice, just in case Midoriya isn't comfortable with him broadcasting his emotional state to the rest of the group. "I, uh, meant what I said, before. Bakugou isn't coming."

"Oh, uh, yeah, I believe you." Midoriya's grin brightens. "It's just, um… it's a little embarrassing but I've never… actually… done this before?"

Eijirou blinks. "Done what?"

"Y-you know. Malls. Friends. Hanging out." Midoriya shakes his head. "A-anyway, where are we going first? There's a whole bunch of places to choose from, and I have some ideas for what to get, but I don't mind walking around and browsing, because I might see something useful that I didn't think of, and I also don't really know my way around, but I guess there are directories and stuff so that's not really much of a problem—"

"Midoriya. My dude." Eijirou lets his hand fall on Midoriya's shoulder, cutting off the nervous chatter. "Chill. All is cool."

"R-right. Oh, hi, Uraraka!" Midoriya catches sight of a few of the others and waves.

It looks like everyone who was going to come is now here. Bakugou is a no-show, and so is Todoroki, but that's all cool. Bakugou was never interested in the first place, and Todoroki isn't really the buddy-buddy hanging out type—unless it's for sparring, apparently.

"Hey, Kirishima?" Midoriya speaks up again, and the embarrassed look is back. "I have an awkward question—"

"Hey look over there! Are those Yuuei students?" As crowded and bustling as this place is, voices still carry, and Kirishima glances over to see a group of other high-schoolers whooping and fist-pumping at them.

"Yeah, those are the freshman!"

"Woooo, Sports Festival!"

"Hot stunts!"

“Wow, there are people who still remember us,” Uraraka remarks. Yeah, Eijirou’s sort of glad Bakugou and Todoroki didn’t show up. They probably would’ve gotten mobbed. He can see Tokoyami surreptitiously hiding behind Shouji, and Eijirou can’t blame him. Third place might be high enough to attract attention, and Tokoyami’s not really strutting-his-stuff-in-public kind of guy.

“Sorry, what were you saying, man?” Kirishima turns back to Midoriya once the rowdy high schoolers move off again. “You had a question?”

“Yeah, um…” Midoriya shifts from foot to foot awkwardly. “Did… did you pass after all? The practical exam, I mean. I just remember Aizawa-sensei said something about remedial classes, but you’re apparently going to the camp with us, so…”

And *ooh*, that stings, but Midoriya looks so embarrassed to ask, like he knows exactly how sensitive it probably is, that Eijirou can’t even be upset. “Ah, right, that. *Oh*—I forgot, you weren’t… you weren’t there, when Aizawa-sensei told us.” *Awkward.* “Yeah, apparently that was another play to get us motivated. Turns out we’re going after all—me and Satou, and Kaminari and Ashido, too!” Eijirou grins. “I mean, there’ll still be remedial stuff, but at least we get to go.”

“Logical ruses,” Midoriya mutters.

“Yeah, my brain’s still a little scrambled. But hey! We’re going camping in the woods and I get to come, so you won’t hear me complaining.”

By now, everyone seems to have a plan, and everyone has a different plan; Jirou and Yaoyorozu are going off to look at kit bags, Uraraka needs bug spray, Ashido’s going with her to look at camping supplies, and so on.

“You have your eyes on anything, Midoriya?” Eijirou asks.

“Wrist weights,” Midoriya answers promptly.

“Huh. Like what the teachers had on, during the exam?”

“Yup.” Midoriya nods. “That’s where I got the idea—they were weighted down but still free to move, and their hands were free. I think it’d be good weight-training.”

Eijirou brightens. “Well hey, you can probably find stuff like that in

sporting goods, and that's where I'm headed."

"Did you say sporting goods?" Hagakure pokes into the conversation. "Me and Kaminari need good outdoor shoes, so we could totally head there together!"

"Sweet!" Eijirou brings his hands together. "How about we set a meeting time and split up? We can get back together and grab some food when we're done!"

It doesn't take long to reach an agreement; everyone is eager to run off, shop, and explore. Eijirou leads the charge with Midoriya, Hagakure, and Kaminari, for all that this is technically his first time visiting this place, so he doesn't exactly know his way around better than any of them. But he's still riding the high of his own excitement and relief, because even though Aizawa-sensei has threatened rigorous training, a class camping trip is still a class camping trip, and rumor has it that Class 1-B is gonna be there too! Maybe he can hang out with Tetsutetsu if they have the chance.

"So I know there's this super-amazing sports store in here somewhere," he says. "We might end up running into the others there anyway, 'cause I bet loads of us are looking for camping gear, right?"

"Well, none of us have been here before, so…" Kaminari glances around at the sprawling shopping center and shrugs. "Should we wander around til we do?"

"We could do that," Hagakure says. "Or we could look at that directory, over there."

Kirishima joins Kaminari in scanning the place. "Where?"

"It's right there!" Hagakure huffs. "Where I'm pointing!"

Kaminari gives her a pained look. "Hagakure, you're wearing a *tank top*."

"I see it," Midoriya says, and his voice shakes like he's trying not to laugh. Hagakure sighs with relief (and annoyance), and she and Midoriya lead the way to the sign.

The shop they're looking for is on the second floor, closer to the opposite end of the mall from where they stand. Still, the layout of the place isn't too complicated; as long as they find their way upstairs, it should be pretty easy to get to.

Of course, that's when they reach their first obstacle: an escalator roped off with caution tape and a brightly colored "out of order" sign.

"Awww, man, that figures," Hagakure blows a raspberry. "Is there another one close by?"

Eijirou casts about quickly, before his eyes alight upon a pair of double doors set into the wall nearby. "Even better—there's the elevator, guys, c'mon."

"Sweet, is it one of those glass ones?" Kaminari keeps pace with him as he leads the way over, and they end up racing each other to be the first to hit the button. It's a close race, but Kaminari wins by virtue of gently zapping him when when Eijirou tries to jostle his way to the front. It's a bold and sneaky move, and Kirishima can't even be annoyed.

It is not, in fact, a glass elevator, but a normal metal one, which is a little disappointing, but hey. If the elevator ride was gonna be the highlight of their trip, then that would probably make it a pretty crap trip, right?

"Um." At the sound of Midoriya's voice, Eijirou looks over his shoulder to find Midoriya hanging back and checking their surroundings. "I'll meet you guys up there. Second floor, right?"

"Huh?" Eijirou frowns. "C'mon, don't get separated now. It's pretty crowded here, and you did say you've never been, right? It'll be better if we stick together."

"I'm not going anywhere, don't worry." Midoriya flashes him a quick grin. "Just trying to find stairs, that's all. Can't skip leg day, right?"

The elevator doors open, and Eijirou rolls his eyes as he catches Midoriya gently by the arm. "C'mon, dude, I know you're hardcore, but you have plenty of time for leg day at camp, right?" Kaminari and Hagakure are already inside, holding the doors open for them, and Kirishima tugs him in. "You don't have to be hardcore twenty-four seven—"

Thud.

Eijirou swears he feels the elevator shake when Midoriya catches the frame. He doesn't just hit it—he *slams* it, hard enough for all that he doesn't use his quirk. Shocked, Eijirou freezes where he is, still holding Midoriya's arm. His friend hasn't followed them in; he's

gripping the edge of the door frame with one white-knuckled hand just to keep Eijirou from pulling him in.

“Kirishima I will pay you cash money to let me take the stairs.” Midoriya looks him dead in the eye, and Eijirou is too shocked to form a proper answer.

“Um. What?”

“I’m not kidding, *name your price*.” The desperate note in Midoriya’s voice is what makes Eijirou let go, and Midoriya pulls his arm back like he’s been burned.

At the last moment, he sees Midoriya’s eyes widen, as if he’s only just realized what he said. He opens his mouth to say something else, then turns and hurries away. Kirishima takes a step to go after him, but the elevator doors slide shut in his face.

Midoriya doesn’t meet them on the second floor.

Stupid. Stupid, stupid, *stupid*.

Izuku weaves through the crowd, bumping and shouldering people as he goes, ignoring all the odd looks he gets as he hurries to put as much distance between himself and the others as possible. His heartbeat rattles in his throat and fills his ears with static. Dimly he’s aware of Rei close to his side, as she always is, but he can’t talk to her, can’t risk it, not when he’s too addled to be discreet about it.

That was stupid. He should have been braver than that. Or if nothing else, he should have been *smarter* than that. But he wasn’t, and now three of his classmates know or at least have an inkling about something he’s tried so hard to keep to himself—and they’ll have *questions*, questions that he won’t want to answer because they’re uncomfortable and pathetic and humiliating and what kind of hero panics over something so harmless and common? He should have kept his head, he should have slipped away before they got close, he should have snatched his arm back before Kirishima could pull him in, he should have gone ahead and met them instead of opening his stupid mouth and giving them a chance to argue, he should have bitten the bullet and followed Kirishima in, *it’s just an elevator, a stupid elevator, not even a closet—*

Izuku sucks in a breath that hitches in his chest. *Avoiding things that hurt you doesn’t count as weakness*, he said that, he remembers saying

that, he remembers Todoroki telling him he said that, but it's so much harder to follow advice than to give it, even when it's the *same damn advice*.

His eyes burn but stay dry, and at least that's something. Even if he just humiliated himself, even if he dreads meeting them again later because they'll ask questions and Kirishima will look at him with sad, guilty eyes like it's somehow his fault Izuku has a weakness like that—at least he isn't crying.

It's a close thing.

Izuku is lost in his head as he makes his way through the throng. Eventually his mind comes to terms with the fact that he has no real idea where he's going, and no intentions that might help him remedy that. He'll have to get to that sporting goods store eventually, if he wants those weights—or he could find Uraraka. Or Iida. Iida will be easy to find, with Tensei following him around like usual.

That's it—he can find one of his other friends and follow them around, try to salvage whatever fun might still be squeezed out of today. If he needs to, he can always come back later, or buy weights online or closer to home. He just has to calm down. Breathe. Get his head out of this mess of choppy emotions and back where it's supposed to be.

It's only when he starts to do that, that he realizes Rei is urgently swatting him in the shoulder and hissing. Izuku blinks his way out the haze and back to the present, just in time to avoid crashing into someone. He swerves out of the way with a yelp, earning a bewildered look from a passing shopper. Izuku blinks back, matching their confused look, before he glances back and realized he just clumsily pirouetted out of the way of a ghost. Rei jostles him by the shoulder and bares her teeth, glaring around him like a suspicious bodyguard. Faint alarm trickles into his veins, and Izuku follows her example to scan their surroundings.

That's… an awful lot of ghosts.

The mall was already crowded, but the spaces between the shoppers are now filled with white-eyed spirits, and their voices pitch above the white noise of conversation. Izuku can't quite pick out words, but what he does hear sends a crackle of fear up his spine. Moans and sobbing, quiet wailing, a few pitched shouts, all of them echoing in his ears and his ears alone—sadness, fear, anger, desperation, *despair*.

The dead aren't happy. There shouldn't be this many of them, not in a

place like this, and not so suddenly, unless a whole lot of people just died simultaneously nearby, or…

Are some of them looking at him?

Izuku checks the news app on his phone, but there's nothing of note happening anywhere in Kiyashi Ward. He scans the crowd, spots a woman who seems lucid enough in spite of the gunshot wound in her throat, and creeps over to her. He sees her face change from anxious fear to shock when she realizes he's looking at her instead of through her.

"Um, excuse me?" He keeps his voice low, barely moves his mouth. "Is something happening—?"

"You can see me?" Her voice shakes. "You can… you can see us?"

"Yes, so please just—"

"You need to leave." She presses her hands to his chest and seems shocked that she can touch him. "You need—you're the one in the photograph, you're not safe, *please,* just leave before he finds you—"

"Before *who* finds me?" Her words twist his confusion into a tight coil of fear, and he almost forgets to keep his voice down.

She grips his arms, and he feels her cold touch even where his shirt sleeves cover his skin. "He's here—dark jacket, with the hood up. You're—you're the kid in the photo, the one he's always talking about—you need to get out of here. Go home." She sees something over her shoulder, and her face goes a shade paler before she vanishes.

Izuku chances a glance behind him, tries to be casual about it, and spots someone in a dark hooded jacket amid the crowd.

Heart in his throat, he starts walking again.

He uses the crowd to his advantage, or at least tries to. It's harder for him to hide in this crowd than it is for someone else to hide from him. But he tries to make do, ducking in where it's thickest, taking roundabout and circuitous routes through the mall. His phone vibrates in his pocket, but he ignores it. He'll worry about that when he's safe on the train home; maybe he'll make up some excuse about being called home by his mother. For now he just has to get out.

He tosses another glance over his shoulder, and the dark jacket is

nowhere in sight. He's not sure whether to feel relieved or more worried. Has he shaken his pursuer? Is he close to an exit? Maybe he can just—

Rei shrieks a warning, and Izuku follows her voice to a nearby pillar. She stands next to it, baring her teeth at the spot behind it where Izuku can't see, and he doesn't need a warning clearer than that. He turns to walk the other way, and that's when his luck runs out.

They're all clustered here, these dead, and that's how Izuku knows he's close—too close to save himself, too close to escape. There are too many bodies in his way, warm and cold alike, and the latter are so used to people phasing through them like mirages that they don't know to part for him.

"Move, move, move," he pleads, and even at a whisper his voice is pitched with desperation. "Please move—"

An arm settles around his shoulders, tight and heavy.

"No need for that." The voice is a familiar one. Izuku finds himself reaching for One For All at the sound—because what are laws and consequences to him, when Shigaraki Tomura is close enough for his stale breath to waft so close to his ear?

Before he can make a move, or even form a thought about what move he could possibly make, the arm shifts. In the next moment there are four fingers on his neck, rough and dry, with untrimmed nails digging into his skin.

"Clever you, spotting me so quickly," Shigaraki murmurs close by his ear, and Izuku can barely hear him over the static ringing in his his head.

(Oh wait, that's not his head. It's Rei—Rei's here. Izuku gropes through empty air until she reaches back and clutches his hand. He can feel the bones in her fingers shifting, forming something something long andmisshapen and grotesque—)

"Don't struggle," Shigaraki advises. "We're just old friends catching up, yes? Just talking. That's all I want to do, is talk. Don't struggle. Maybe take a moment—breathe slow. Don't let anyone know, or else —I have four fingers on you. You remember what happens when I add one more?"

The memory flashes across his eyes, unwelcome and sickeningly vivid

—Aizawa-sensei's arm, the sleeve crumbled away and the flesh quick to follow—

"It's slow."

The fingers twitch against his neck. "What was that?"

"Your quirk." He's good at this—at observation, at analysis. He can do this in his sleep, so why not do it amid the fear? "If you could dust me with one touch, you'd have done that to Aizawa-sensei. It doesn't work that fast. Of course—" He swallows, and—no, better not do that too much, it makes his throat bob closer to that fifth finger. "—you had his arm, n-not his neck. But—I'd give myself a few seconds at least, to get out of your grip before it reached anything vital. It'd hurt, but I could survive." He has to pause there, because he knows those chances are slim. "And even if I didn't, I wonder how many heroes there are in the crowd."

He keeps his grip on Rei's hand, because he can hear her tensing, gathering herself, ready to make her objections known one way or another. He jerks on his grip until she looks down at his free hand and the words he's spelling out at his hip, outside of Shigaraki's field of vision. *Don't. If he panics, he'll touch.* She squeezes back, and keeps quiet.

"I wonder how many people I could kill before any of them reached me and took me down," Shigaraki answers, and Izuku has to risk swallowing again because it's that or gag. "Look at them, all those little NPCs running around. Like little bags of EXP." He sighs with something like longing. "That's the difference, between you and me. I don't care how many people I kill on my way out."

He feels it—the panic coming in as inexorably as the tide, each wave bigger and higher until he's ready to drown. In his mind he thrashes and flounders, desperate to stay afloat, to keep his head above water and keep breathing. He's a finger's width away from being dust on the ground. He's so close to death, *he's never been so close to death before—*

The icy grip on his hand tightens, and the chill spreads through him like thorny vines, reaching ever closer to his core. They prick as they go, returning the feeling to things that were otherwise muted by encroaching panic. Hope and joy are quick to drown like sparks plunged in water, but then the chill reaches his anger, and it blooms warm in his chest.

He's never been so close to death before. What is he talking about? He's

been close to death since he was small. He's been surrounded by things that only he could touch, that only he could be hurt by, and Shigaraki is volatile and hungry for death and destruction, but he is not one of them.

Shigaraki grips his throat, but Rei grips his hand.

You are only a man, Izuku thinks. *A man who eats and sleeps and breathes, and my friends are scarier than you.*

"That's better," Shigaraki says. "Come on, hurry up. Let's have a seat together, shall we?"

He lets Shigaraki guide him to a bench and sits down gingerly with him, mindful of how close that finger hovers over his neck. He can't risk a deep breath before he speaks. "So. What did you want to talk about?"

"You're annoying," Shigaraki tells him.

"I'm sorry."

"Shut up." His fingers twitch, and Izuku presses his lips together. "You want to know why you're annoying? Because I can't decide—whether I hate you or not." He hisses through his teeth. "You piss me off. But you know who pisses me off the most right now? The Hero Killer."

"That's reasonable." Izuku hopes his voice sounds as calm to Shigaraki's ears as it does to his own. He wishes he could control his own heartbeat, because Shigaraki must be able to feel it, with his fingers positioned where they are.

"It's partly *your* fault," Shigaraki snarls. "Because you ran into him. You fought him. And now *everyone's* talking about him." His fingers tighten again, nails digging into flesh. "About *him.* Why aren't they talking about *me?*"

Izuku keeps silent, not sure if that's meant to be rhetorical or not. Of course, if it's not, then he might piss off his captor by taking too long to answer. He can't risk turning his head to try to gauge his expression, not without possibly bumping his fingertip. "Um—"

"That's what pisses me off," Shigaraki goes on. "I did—I did *so much*. Right? I released those Noumu in the city. I attacked the USJ—I *infiltrated Yuuei*, and nobody's ever done before, ever, and what do I get? Nothing. Nobody. Everyone only cares about *Stain.*" His breath

rattles harshly in his throat.

“Sorry,” Izuku says. He’s trying to come up with a plan, but all he can think of is exactly what he’s already doing. There’s no promise of help coming like there was at the USJ, or when he fought Stain. He can stall for time, but for what? He can’t risk going for his phone, because Shigaraki is close enough to feel that, and there’s no way in hell Izuku is luring one of his friends straight into Shigaraki’s hands.

All he can do is keep Shigaraki talking until he gets bored, and maybe, if Izuku is very lucky, all he’ll do then is leave.

“Sorry for what?” Shigaraki snaps.

“Tried to keep it quiet,” Izuku says. “Fought him in a dark empty alley and everything. No witnesses. I didn’t even get credit for it.”

Shigaraki hisses through his teeth again, but he doesn’t dig his nails in this time. “Then why? Why does everyone *like him so much?*”

“You might be asking the wrong person,” Izuku says. “He stabbed two of my friends and knifed me a couple times, and… most people haven’t had that happen to them.”

“*I* have,” Shigaraki snarls. “When we told him to join our party, he stabbed me *and* Kurogiri.”

“That must have been awful.”

“There must be *some reason*,” Shigaraki goes on. “And you’re no help at all.”

Whatever Shigaraki wants, he still hasn’t gotten it yet, and Izuku scrapes his mind together and tries to wrap it around the question. He falls silent, watching the crowd. The dead watch him back, waiting—always waiting. They’re wondering if he’s going to join them. If *anyone’s* going to join them today. Everyone is waiting for Izuku—the ghosts are waiting for him to survive or to die, Shigaraki is waiting for him to answer, Kirishima and the others are waiting for him to meet them on the second floor, his mother is waiting for him to come home —

He can’t afford to keep them waiting.

“What’s your favorite video game?” he asks.

He feels Shigaraki go still, and this time he risks turning his head just slightly. His first glimpse of Shigaraki Tomura's face is not a pleasant one—his skin is almost gray, with pale hair falling into his beady, bloodshot eyes. Tiny scars and nicks mar the skin, and his lips are chapped and bloodless. Izuku averts his eyes again.

"…What?" Shigaraki says at last.

"I know you like them. What's your favorite?" His own lips feel dry, so he runs his tongue over them. "Mine's Undertale."

Shigaraki is silent and still for a few moments. Just when Izuku is starting to think he won't answer at all, his captor's raspy voice reaches his ears again, less of a snarl than a subdued mumble.

"…I like Bioshock."

"That's a good one." Izuku almost nods in agreement, but thinks better of it. "I, uh. I bet you always harvest all the Little Sisters, huh."

"You get more ADAM that way," Shigaraki snaps. "What's your point?"

"People like a good story," Izuku says. "Most people—everything happens on the news, not to them, so it's just—it's just a story, to them. And a good story needs a good villain, right?" He doesn't wait for Shigaraki to answers. "Bioshock has—has Andrew Ryan, and Frank Fontaine, and—I guess, depending on how you play, you could end up the villain, too." He swallows against the tickle in his gag reflex. "And all those villains—they all want something, right? F-Fontaine wanted money, and power, and Ryan—"

"Ryan wanted to be free," Shigaraki murmured. "He wanted to do whatever he wanted, without any *parasites* telling him what to do." For a split second the grip tightens enough to close Izuku's windpipe, but it loosens again. "Free will. No stupid laws." Izuku can hear his teeth grind. "That's what *I* want, too. What's your point?"

"My point is that nobody can tell," Izuku answers, and braces himself for a touch, for pain, but it doesn't come, so he keeps going. "Everyone knows what Stain wanted. He had an ideal, that he was working for, and—and it wasn't right, and his methods weren't right either, but he had that ideal." He swallows again, tasting bile. "That's what people like. That's what's interesting. And nobody can tell what you want. You just destroy stuff, and… that's not interesting."

“But I *want* to destroy things,” Shigaraki snarls. “I *want* to break the things I don’t like.”

“What for?”

The only reply he gets is silence, broken by the hum of activity around them. Shigaraki is quiet, thinking, and Izuku isn’t sure if he’s thinking about the question or considering whether or not to kill him.

“I guess… people like villains who—who break things, in order to make new ones?” Izuku pauses. His eyes are starting to burn, and he prays that they won’t spill over. “Andrew Ryan wanted to make a utopia. Stain wanted to make a better world.” He blinks back tears. “Is there something you want to make, Shigaraki?”

The silence stretches further, and Izuku has run out of things to say. His analogy has run its course, and still nothing. Shigaraki is still here, the ghosts are still here, Rei is still here, and—

“I’ve decided,” Shigaraki says, and his voice is… brighter, now. It’s almost lively. “I’ve decided. I think I like you, Midoriya Izuku.”

His grip loosens enough for Izuku to turn his head again, and he comes face to face with a nightmare of a smile. There’s something different now, something heavier in the air, like a new layer to Shigaraki’s eerie presence. It’s barely a fraction of what he feels from most poltergeists—from what he felt from Stain, moments before his fall—but it’s similar enough to bring the bile creeping up his throat again. So Izuku does what he always does, when death is staring him in the face and the fear is too powerful to trick.

He parts his lips from his teeth, and smiles back.

“*Deku?*”

Shigaraki’s head turns to look for the voice, which is good because Izuku’s smile takes on a desperate note when he recognizes Uraraka’s call. “Ah—so you had company? You should’ve said. I should’ve known your little friends would be running around here, too.”

The hand leaves his throat, and his grip was never hard enough to throttle, but Izuku’s next breath shudders on the way in all the same. Rei hugs his arm, and that’s all that keeps him from pitching forward off the bench. Now free to moves, he spots Uraraka and Kirishima weaving through the crowd. Uraraka’s phone is in her hand.

“Well, seeya.” Shigaraki rises abruptly from the bench. “Don’t try to chase after me—you know what’ll happen if you do.”

“Uh-huh.” Izuku’s head swims. “Shigaraki—”

“Yeah?”

“What about All For One?” His voice cracks. “What’s he trying to make?”

Shigaraki turns his head, just enough for Izuku to see the curve of his smile. “Wouldn’t you like to know? Maybe you’ll get to ask him someday.”

And with that, he’s gone, vanishing into the crowd. Izuku struggles to his feet just as Uraraka comes rushing to his side with Kirishima close behind her.

“Deku, I got your message—” Whatever his face looks like right now, it must not be good, because Uraraka goes pale when she sees him. “What happened? Are you all right?”

“Who *was* that?” Kirishima asks, twisting around to search the crowd.

“Oh, that was Shigaraki,” Izuku replies faintly. The wave is back again, higher and heavier than ever before. He’s used up the delay. “He wanted to talk. Can you guys call someone?”

If one of them replies, he’s beyond hearing them. The dead are filtering out of the crowd once more, and Izuku knows that Shigaraki will be long gone before any police or heroes reach them.

He makes it to the nearest trash can before being violently sick.

Chapter End Notes

> CW: panic reaction to claustrophobia, physical intimidation, death threat, non-graphic vomiting.

Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Artwork!!!

kirroi

multiple artworks by biteitwhenitssoft

quesadilla-day

metorblazes

lydiekitties

eminencentrose

snowyowlrose

an-android-in-a-tutu plus this cool comic

saritaadraw

two from carbonblossoms

rachelzange

swiggity-swexual-i-am-asexual

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evietheeevee

littleblueberryartist

bluecifer13

fingerspellingtopassthetime

otakudinogamer

purewriting

theflyinghamster

appsa

And as always, this story has a TV Tropes page!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Midoriya, I am so sorry,” Kirishima says, for at least the fiftieth time.

For his part, Izuku simply nods. He could probably manage speaking if he tried, but for now he’s content to wait until the cops get there.

His throat burns from puking, and the skin on his neck feels horribly itchy, but other than that he’s none the worse for wear. It’s certainly a step up from the last time he saw Shigaraki. Whatever else happens, at least it’s not as bad as the USJ, or Stain, or anything else. Nobody got hurt. Mom’s going to panic regardless, and Uraraka won’t stop looking terribly scared, but it’s important to focus on the positives. To do anything else at this point would mean spiraling into a panic.

The police arrive quickly to secure the scene, shortly before his friends and classmates converge on him to make sure he’s still alive. There’s no sign of Shigaraki by then, as Izuku had expected, and he finds himself pulled away from his worried classmates and whisked off to the police station. Uraraka and Kirishima bid him a worried goodbye, Kirishima squeezes in one last profuse apology, and that’s the last Izuku sees of them.

Tsukauchi Naomasa is there to take charge of him, and that’s a relief. All-Might trusts Tsukauchi, so Izuku does too, though no one’s bothered to tell him how and why they ended up as close as they are. He still feels safe around Tsukauchi, because he’s a cop and he’s All-Might’s friend and, right now, he’s one of the few people on the planet that knows at least one of Izuku’s biggest secrets.

Ironically, it’s that very relief that brings on what Izuku hesitates to call a panic attack, because he hates to be dramatic, but—what the hell, it’s a panic attack. He’s out of danger, he feels safer than he did before, and that means he feels safe enough to fall apart a little.

It sinks in deep, just how lucky he is to be alive, and Izuku has never been more glad that he can put his feelings on a temporary delay. Only Uraraka and Kirishima were there to see him stress-vomit into a mall trash can, and only Tsukauchi is here to see him descend into subdued hysterics in the middle of explaining why the leader of the

League of Villains didn't murder him.

"Sorry," he gasps out, as soon as he stops feeling like he's suffocating on perfectly good oxygen. Small, cold fingers comb through his hair, and Rei's white noise falls comfortingly on his ears.

Tsukauchi grounds him with a hand on his shoulder, a single point of contact connecting Izuku to the real world, like a string on a helium balloon. For a wild moment he wonders if he'll go rocketing into the stratosphere if Tsukauchi lets go. But Tsukauchi doesn't, so Izuku stares at the floor in shame, traces the edges of the tiles with his eyes, and finishes telling him what happened.

"He said… he liked you?" Tsukauchi's tone is neutral, and Izuku winces.

"I wasn't *trying* to—to make a good impression," he says. "I just didn't want him to put his last finger down."

"I know," Tsukauchi assures him. "You did good—you did *great*, keeping your head for as long as you did." He gives Izuku's shoulder a light squeeze before letting go at last. Izuku, miraculously, stays rooted to the ground. "Now, I just have one last question, and I know it's been a long day, but I need you to think hard for me. Did he tell you anything else? Any kind of hint about what his group has planned?"

Izuku shakes his head. "I, um." he sniffles a little, embarrassingly enough. "Actually, it was sort of like… he wasn't sure? Like… like he was upset about something, and frustrated because nobody else was upset about it like he was."

"Like he was looking for validation?" Tsukauchi asks.

"Y-yeah, I think so. And…" Izuku thinks hard, mentally pummels his brain around, trying to knock something useful loose. "I'm sorry, there wasn't anything else. Nothing specific, anyway."

"Anything more general, then?"

"Well he's got *something* planned," Izuku says. His hands are in the hem of his shirt, working at it in agitation. "Or… or his teacher has something planned. I asked him, and he said maybe I'd get to ask him myself, so… yeah. There's *something*, but… but you already knew that, so that's not really helpful."

“It’s not as useless as you might think,” Tsukauchi tells him, and smiles. “Don’t worry. Even if there’s nothing new to add to our intel, you still kept your head and kept collateral damage to a minimum—to zero, actually. You’re a brave kid and you have a good head on your shoulders—I can see why All-Might’s taken a shine to you.” Izuku’s face feels wobbly, but he manages to smile back.

“Hey! Izuku!” And then Ms. Nana is there in the room, blinking in and out of view. She looks normal and unbloodied, so she isn’t as agitated as she could be, but she still hovers around him, checking him from all angles.

He smiles, and signs a quick hello in his lap.

“Holy *hell*, sprout, I’m starting to think I’ve been shadowing the wrong trouble magnet!” She finally stops flickering and hovers there, wringing her hands. “Toshi’s on his way, by the way. He’s not quite here yet, but I got impatient and went on ahead. You okay?”

Izuku gives a tiny, nearly imperceptible nod.

“Something else on your mind?” Tsukauchi asks.

“N-no,” he says. “I’m just… glad it’s over. For now.”

They meet All-Might outside, just as he’s walking up to the front door. Izuku’s still a little shaky from panicking, but at the sight of his mentor he forces himself steady. Not trusting himself to put on another proper smile, he smooths his face into a neutral expression. All-Might’s gaunt face is hard to read, but Izuku is pretty sure he can see relief in it. There’s no surprise there; All-Might isn’t primed for a fight right now. He’s powered down, and his clothes are loose-fitting but not so much that they would accommodate his hero form.

He almost looks… normal this way.

The touch to his head surprises Izuku, and he twitches involuntarily. He doesn’t mean anything by it; he’s just surprised, that’s all. He didn’t expect it. But he sees All-Might’s face change just a little, and he realizes that his teacher’s mistaking it for a flinch, an indication that the touch is unwelcome.

It’s *not*.

He feels All-Might’s hand start to leave, and he leans forward to chase it before he can stop himself. It’s embarrassing, even more

embarrassing than getting spooked by a simple touch to the head, and he shuts his eyes.

All-Might hesitates a split second more, then gently ruffles his hair. Izuku cants his head into the touch again and tries not to feel too pathetic.

“I’m glad you’re all right,” his mentor tells him. “And I’m sorry I wasn’t there to help you.”

“I think I messed up,” he says.

“Hm?”

Izuku catches his lower lip between his teeth. “I think…”

I’ve decided. I think like you, Midoriya Izuku.

“I think I helped him,” he says, and tries not to think of the manic smile on Shigaraki’s face, his cheerful, almost friendly tone as they parted ways. “And—not in a good way. I wanted to buy time, and I figured I could do that by just… telling him what he wanted to hear. But I think I made everything worse.” He swallows hard. “And I’ve made him notice me. And I know you said before that you wanted me to announce myself, but… not like this. Not to someone like him.”

“It couldn’t be helped, munchkin,” Nana says gently, and All-Might’s hand slides to the back of his head and rests there. “You kids have been in the spotlight ever since Toshi signed on as a teacher. And I know you can’t help being you.”

“That’s the trouble with power like ours,” All-Might says, before Nana is quite finished speaking. “It’s loud, and bright. It rarely gives you a chance to properly hide.”

“That too,” Nana sighs.

“It’s happening so fast,” Izuku says. “I thought I’d be ready, but…”

“I know.” The hand moves from his head to his shoulder. “And I’ve been putting a lot of pressure on you, because I’ve left this so long. That’s my fault, not yours.” He squeezes gently, making Izuku look up. “And whatever you said to Shigaraki, whatever that caused, it was only one conversation, my boy. I guarantee that what you said to him won’t make him do anything he wouldn’t have done on his own.”

“You can’t take all the responsibility for other people’s actions,” Tsukauchi adds. “Especially villains. They’re unpredictable and dangerous, and the best you can do is minimize the damage—as you did, today.”

Izuku nods.

“In any case, it’s getting late,” Tsukauchi tells him. “And I believe your ride’s here.”

His mother arrives, fighting back tears and not quite winning. She’s not alone; Morino and old Mrs. Matsuda are with her, flanking her like an invisible honor guard. And just like that, it’s easy for Izuku to bundle his own worries away for later, because his mom is in front of him, and she’s crying and frightened, and it’s easy to reassure her than it is to reassure himself. It’s distracting and calming at the same time, and as Mom’s tears dry up, he feels as if he might be able to breathe again.

“We decided to come with her, just in case,” Morino tells him as one of the officers accompanies them to see them off. “I mean, I’m not sure what we could’ve done if something bad had happened, but we figured it’d make you feel better if she didn’t come in by herself.”

Officer Tamakawa is still within hearing range, so Izuku simply gives her a grateful smile.

“Where’s the other one?” Mrs. Matsuda nudges him. Even in her spectral state, her hand is still gnarled and wrinkly. “Are they coming back with us, or what?”

Izuku blinks at her in confusion, glances around, and sees Rei flitting around Officer Tamakawa, fascinated by him because he has the head of a ginger tabby cat. Izuku points to her discreetly and looks to Mrs. Matsuda again.

“No no, I meant the *other* one,” the old ghost says. “Thought I saw somebody else with you. Some other kid.” At his confused look, she shrugs. “Never mind then. Must’ve been imagining things. Or some nosy kid hanging around and running off.”

It’s probably nothing, but Izuku finds himself looking over his shoulder a few times as they make their way home. He could swear, a couple times, that he sees movement.

Barely a full day has passed before Izuku decides that Mrs. Matsuda was right. And he is no stranger to being followed.

It's sort of inevitable, with the ability that he has. The dead get curious, if they're lucid enough to focus, and it's not like they have anything better to do. So they do as they please, and as long as they aren't distressed or hurting anyone, Izuku is content to leave them be and let them follow him around to their heart's content.

The thing is, though, it doesn't tend to last long. If they aren't lucid, then they forget him fairly quickly and return to whatever cycles of memory usually keep them occupied. If they are, then they eventually drift away when the novelty wears off.

There have been persistent ghosts before, but those ones tend to be chatty, at least. If they're persistent then it means they want to be seen and heard, as soon as possible. Three days of following is long enough to be an outlier. Three days without seeing their face or hearing their voice is enough to get his attention. And lately, he could swear that the strange telltale noises and split-second glimpses are getting closer.

Rei is just as perplexed as he is, and that's what pushes it into alarming. She's gone off to try and talk to them many times, but whoever they are, they keep vanishing on her.

"I wonder what brought this on," Izuku whispers to her one night, when he's up at barely five in the morning. He's had worse nights for bad dreams, but he still needs to settle his nerves over animals on Youtube, and it's doubtful that he'll get back to sleep. "How long have they been following us now?"

Four days, she tells him, and points to a promising-looking thumbnail. Izuku selects it, and the two of them watch a woman give her Samoyed a bath.

Izuku feels teased by the normalcy. He's been distracted lately, because the mall incident is fresh in his mind and the school trip is almost upon him. Even now, his bedroom floor is a mess of packing. Life and training are chugging along, heedless of the debris from all the bombshells that have been dropping lately. He's excited for the trip, but excitement gets lost so easily in his worries.

He won't go away, Rei continues. *But he won't show himself either. He's getting closer but he's so slow.*

"It's a he, then?"

I think so.

“It’s funny, though,” Izuku says. He shifts on his bed, uncrossing his legs when he feels his foot go to sleep. “Could just be a coincidence, but I could swear it’s been happening since the mall in Kiyashi Ward.”

Rei looks at him sharply, eyes dark and liquid. Flyaway strands of dark hair fall over her face.

“Could be wrong,” Izuku says, eyelids drooping as the woman in the video explains the blow-drying process. “But there were a lot of ghosts that day, following Shigaraki. Maybe I picked up one of them.”

Rei’s eyes narrow. *Why would any of them want you, when he’s the one that killed them?*

“We don’t know that he did,” he murmurs. “Ms. Nana said she recognized some of them, at the USJ. She probably means she first saw them when All-Might confronted All For One. If All For One’s like a teacher to Shigaraki, then… I don’t know. Maybe some of his ghosts transferred over.” The video ends. His throat feels dry, and his room feels far too small. “Maybe the League of Villains just has a whole crowd of ghosts, and there’s so many of them and they’ve been there so long that no one knows who they’re supposed to follow and haunt anymore.”

It’s not pleasant to think about, mainly because it reminds him so sharply of tonight’s nightmares. His lungs feel simultaneously too full a nd too empty, and it’s not until Rei jabs another thumbnail on his phone that he’s jarred back into proper breathing. The video comes up before he touches the screen. Ferrets this time, playing in a box of packing peanuts.

He goes out the next day, because it’s probably his last chance before he has to leave for the summer trip. There’s a dead woman whose young daughter lost her favorite toy somewhere in another part of town, and he would like to try and find it before he has to go. Rei comes along, for company and another set of eyes.

He knows they’re following him again. Or *he’s* following him, according to Rei. Izuku can’t catch a good enough glimpse to judge for himself. All he knows is that they’re close now but they won’t talk to him, or appear to him, or do anything but follow him and vanish when he turns around.

For an hour he wanders the street shops, scanning the sidewalks and

alleys for any sign of a well-loved stuffed dog. Purple with floppy ears, that was what Mrs. Shigeyama had told him. There's no sign of it in streets or dumpsters, and even the shopkeepers and vendors can only shrug at him apologetically.

Luckily, there's a park near here where Mrs. Shigeyama says her daughter loved to play. He can get to it quickly if he crosses a couple of busy streets. One of them has an underpass so he doesn't have to stop and wait for traffic. It's quieter there, away from cars and most pedestrians, so maybe he and Rei can hold a real conversation for a while.

Izuku hesitates as the path ahead dips downward, and he swallows against the sudden lump in his throat. The last time he ducked into an underpass like this, he was fourteen years old and nearly suffocated on someone's slime quirk. It's not a pleasant memory, for all that it led to his meeting All-Might, and he has combat training and a quirk now but he would still feel better avoiding that sort of thing.

Wait here. Rei, ever helpful, does a quick check for him and comes back to give him the all clear. Izuku's heart lightens, and he jogs down to pass through it as quickly as he can. It's not cramped enough to spook him, but the faster he gets to the other side, the better.

In the end, he doesn't know what triggers it. Maybe it's how isolated it is; the underpass is empty of people both living and dead. Maybe it's the darkness, or the closeness of the walls and ceiling. Or maybe it's finally had enough time to get close to him.

Rei shrieks a warning, and Izuku is hit from behind.

He has no time to react, to defend, or even to break his fall. The blow sends him sprawling, bloodies his nose against the cement, and pins him there with a grip that digs sharply into his back. He hears another shriek, grating high-frequency static that drills into his ears, as talons rake the back of his neck and wind buffets him from above.

Rei screams in fury, and all at once the clawing weight is torn away. Izuku rolls over on his back, tasting salt and copper, and has just enough time to raise his arms in a shield before he's struck once more from the front.

He scrabbles backward and nearly reaches the wall before it—before the ghost pins him flat on his back and rakes at him with grasping claws. And the wind…

Not wind at all, he realizes. It can't be. Wind doesn't sound like that—punctuated, rhythmic, almost like

wingbeats.

Clawed hands close on his shielding arms, wrenching them away from his face. Izuku opens his eyes, and stares up at the ghost.

His breath catches in his throat. He tries to gasp, but his voice comes out with it and it sounds more like a whimper. Rei grabs the frenzied ghost from behind and drags it off him, and Izuku crawls backward the moment he can move. He drags himself along the dirty concrete until his back is to the rough wall of the underpass, and he can *see*. It's impossible not to see.

Black pits stare back at him from a pale, distorted face. The ghost's form shifts, features changing and melting and unstable as it thrashes in Rei's grip. It's bigger than her, and she has always been strong, but she can barely hold it back.

Him, Izuku thinks numbly. Not it. Him.

The ghost's jaws part as he struggles and reaches for Izuku, deformed and mutilated and *familiar, so familiar.* Nothing but rattling and hissing emerges, and yet

And yet

It very nearly forms a word. It's a word that Izuku knows well, one that he has heard all his life.

"*De… ku.*"

With a desperate heave, the ghost thrashes out of Rei's grip and lunges again—no, *crawls*, he crawls to him, drags leathery wings that bleed black from the ragged membrane, and his hands aren't clawing, they aren't hurting, they're *grabbing*, clutching him, clinging to him like the ghost is desperate. Like the ghost is *afraid*.

And why wouldn't he be? He can't be much older than Izuku is.

Izuku is crying, and he doesn't know when he started, but now he can't stop, because this face may be older now than when he last saw it, it may be shifting, melting, deforming and reforming before his eyes, but *he knows this face.*

"*Tsubasa-kun,*" he gasps. "Tsu—Tsubasa. It's me. Do you remember me?" The ghost clings to him until his claws pierce through Izuku's sleeve, and Izuku whimpers with pain but lets him. "I-it's me, Deku. You remember me, right?" Tsubasa *screams,* and Izuku shakes and sobs as he speaks. "We were—" *friends,* he almost says, but they weren't friends, were barely even playmates, because Tsubasa either ignored him or bullied him the same as everyone else. "W-we all played together, with—K-Kacchan! Do you remember Kacchan?"

Tsubasa wails again. He looks so *young*, just a teenager like Izuku, and Izuku hasn't seen him since they were small but he still looks small now, too small, too young to look like this.

He's dead. The realization falls on him, almost belated. *We played when we were tiny. He laughed at Kacchan's jokes. He's dead. I knew him alive, I saw him and heard him and talked to him and touched him, and now he's dead.*

"What happened?" he chokes out. "Tsubasa-kun—what happened to you?"

"*Deku*," at least, that's what he think Tsubasa says. He clutches at Izuku's jacket. Desperate. Pleading. "*Deku.*"

"I don't know," Izuku sobs. "I don't know how to help. Who did this to you?"

Tsubasa screams.

Pain nearly splits Izuku's skull in half, and he curls up against the wall and presses his palms to his ears, but he can still hear Tsubasa scream.

And then it's over. Izuku opens his eyes (*when did he close them?*) and Tsubasa is gone, and only Rei is there, shaking from a few feet away as she watches him with wide eyes.

"I don't know," he whispers, and Tsubasa is gone but he still can't stop crying. "I don't know, Rei, I don't know, *I don't know.*"

All-Might isn't there to rescue him, not this time. This time, Izuku sobs until his tears are spent, drags himself up, and stumbles back out into the sunlight.

Tsubasa follows him home without a sound, close enough to touch.

Eijirou isn't usually the kind of guy who stresses over punctuality. As long as he makes it before the late bell, he's golden; that's his only criteria.

But today is a special case. He's a man on a mission.

It's been less than a week since what went down at the mall, and Eijirou hasn't had the chance to talk to Midoriya since. They've said stuff to each other, sure, but they haven't really *talked*. There just hasn't been time, or a good moment for Eijirou to pull the guy aside. Midoriya's been quiet and jumpy ever since then, looking over his shoulder like he thinks someone's following him, and Eijirou doesn't blame him at *all*.

If he blames anybody, it's his own damn self.

So he sets his alarm for the morning of the school trip, and for once he actually gets up the first time around, instead of rolling over and hitting snooze. He drags himself up, stumbles like a zombie through getting his stuff together, and gets to school twenty minutes earlier than he usually would.

He isn't surprised to see that Iida was one of the first (probably *the* first) people to get there. Dude's as crazy about being on time as Eijirou isn't. He's a little surprised to see Midoriya there too, especially since Midoriya looks kinda *dead*. He's got an even worse zombie look than Eijirou does, and Eijirou has to wonder 1) if he got any sleep at all last night, and 2) how the hell he dragged a full backpack *and* a big-ass duffel bag all the way here when he looks like a strong wind might knock him over.

Guilt twists in his gut, and he looks around. Iida, Yaoyorozu, and Todoroki are also there, but nobody else. He has plenty of time, probably.

"Hey, Midoriya." He sidles closer, probably not very subtly, but it still takes Midoriya a moment to register that he's there. In fact, he doesn't notice at all, until Eijirou reaches out to tap his shoulder. Midoriya startles at the touch, and Eijirou yanks his hand back like it burned. "Sorry! I'm so sorry, Midoriya, I didn't mean to spook you."

"I'm fine." If Midoriya looks bad from far off, he looks even worse when he's looking Eijirou in the eye. "Need something?"

"Uh, I was just—could I talk to you? For a sec?" Midoriya blinks owlishly at him, and Eijirou adds, "In private, I mean."

“O-oh. Yeah, sure.” Midoriya looks over to Iida and opens his mouth.

“We’d be happy to watch your things,” Iida says, before he can get a word out.

“Thanks.” With that, Midoriya trudges to follow Eijirou a little ways off, far enough that anyone who isn’t Jirou or Shouji wouldn’t be able to hear.

Taking a deep breath, Eijirou launches himself straight into it. “Listen, I know I’ve said this a lot, but I’m really, really sorry about what happened at the mall.”

“’Sfine,” Midoriya says.

Eijirou shakes his head. “No, man, it really isn’t.”

“I don’t know what you’re apologizing for,” Midoriya tells him. “You and Uraraka were the first ones to find me. And it’s not like you knew there’d be a villain wandering around.”

“Well, yeah, I mean after what went down with freaking *Stain*, I figured that if I received a cryptic text message from you then it probably meant you were in a jam.” Eijirou shrugs uncomfortably. “And anyway, I wasn’t really apologizing for Shigaraki, more just… before that.”

Midoriya’s eyes lose focus for a moment. “Before…?”

“The, uh.” He takes the plunge. “The elevator.”

Something about the way Midoriya’s face shifts reminds Eijirou of heavy vault doors slamming. “Oh,” he says. “That.”

“Y-you don’t have to tell me anything about it!” Eijirou says quickly. “Really! I just… I’m sorry for pulling on you like that. And freaking you out. I think if I hadn’t done that then maybe you wouldn’t have had to run off, and you wouldn’t have… y’know.” He shrugs again, feeling helpless and awkward. “I should’ve paid more attention.”

“I don’t like people to know,” Midoriya says softly.

“I-I won’t tell anyone!” Eijirou almost trips over himself to assure him. “Of course I wouldn’t, that’d be the *opposite* of manly. Lips are sealed, promise.”

“I don’t mean—I don’t like people to know, so I hide it, so you

couldn't have known," Midoriya tells him. "You're not a mind-reader, Kirishima."

"Midoriya. Dude." Eijirou sighs heavily. "That's… kinda not what I'm going for. I'm looking for something more along the lines of 'I accept your apology,' not… not telling me there's nothing to apologize for."

His friend gives him an exhausted smile. "Okay, Kirishima, I accept your apology."

Eijirou lets out a breath, and his shoulders slump as the air leaves him. "Okay then. Cool. Good."

"I'm usually okay with tunnels," Midoriya continues.

"Huh?"

"I-I mean…" Midoriya shifts from foot to foot. "I just… I'm usually, um, fine. If I'm moving somewhere, and it's not too small. I just… don't like being somewhere that's really small, when I can't go anywhere. So like, closets. Or… or elevators. I-it's better if I'm moving through it. I still get nervous, but I don't, um." He doesn't finish that sentence.

"Got it," Eijirou says. "Thanks. For telling me."

"Thanks for… understanding, I guess."

"Hey, understanding's the easy part." Eijirou manages to grin at him. "So… a-are we cool?"

Another owlish blink. "Were we *not* cool at some point?"

"I mean, I dunno?" This conversation is starting to devolve into them asking each other questions. "Between almost yanking you into an elevator, and like, me being friends with Bakugou, I guess I'm never really sure?"

Midoriya frowns, confused. "You can be friends with Bakugou if you want." And it is a relief to hear him say that, and mean it, because that's been bothering him ever since the final exams. Hell, even before that he wasn't quite sure.

"A-are you sure?" His worries overflow and spill out before he can stop them. "Because I like to think we're bros too, you and me, but Bakugou kinda… isn't super great to you, and I completely don't like

that he treats you like that, but there's other stuff I *do* like about him, and I just… I hope you know it's not all across-the-board approval, with me. If that makes sense." It's his turn to shift a little on his feet. "I know it's super awkward to be friends with people who hang out with people you don't like, so…"

"Kirishima, I'm glad you're friends with Bakugou," Midoriya tells him bluntly, and Eijirou has to stare.

"Um. Oh. R-really?"

"I don't get Bakugou's problems," Midoriya tells him, and for a moment he looks tired again, even more tired than before, if that's even possible. "I know he has them, and I sort of know what they are, but I don't know how to fix them. And—we used to be friends, but we're not anymore, and there's just too much bad stuff between us at this point for us to go back, and… sometimes I wish I could help him, but I can't, and I'm—I don't know what'll happen if I try. I don't think I'm the right person." He meets Eijirou's eyes, briefly. "You might be, though."

Eijirou's breath hitches. "Dude, I…"

Midoriya shuts his eyes, shakes his head vigorously. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't say that. Aizawa-sensei—he said he was wrong to make somebody else's growth my problem, so I shouldn't do that to you. But…" God, he looks tired. Eijirou hopes he can catch some sleep on the bus ride. "…he listens to you. And you're a really good person. So yeah, I'm glad you're friends with him."

Eijirou purses his lips and wow, he kind of wants to cry all of a sudden, isn't that weird? "I'm, uh. Really glad, man," he says. "And—listen, I know he gives you a hard time, like, all the time, so… if you ever need me to… I dunno. Step in? Just lemme know. I'll try and keep an eye out, but… yeah."

Midoriya blinks, and his eyes go a little cloudy for a moment. "Could I ask a favor?"

"I mean… I literally *just said* that, dude…"

"I wanted to ask him something," Midoriya says. "I don't know if he'll answer me. I don't even know if he'll answer *you*, but… there's just something that's been bothering me."

"Okay," Eijirou says, nodding. "What is it?"

Midoriya hesitates for a second, and his face freezes blank. “We fell out of touch when we were little, but before that, we had sort of a mutual friend. I haven’t heard from him in a while, and I’ve just… been wondering what happened to him. Where he went.”

“Want me to ask after him for you?” Eijirou offers. “I can totally do that. What’s the guy’s name?”

“Tsubasa,” Midoriya whispers it first, too softly for Eijirou to hear, then coughs and tries again. “His name was Tsubasa. Just… could you see if Bakugou knows anything about where he ended up?”

“No problem!” Eijirou says eagerly. “I’ll see if I can slip that into a conversation all sneaky and stuff.”

His friend gives him another tired smile. “Thanks, Kirishima.”

“No problem, buddy!”

Miracle of miracles, the smile stays where it is, and there’s not a single trace of baby-eating in it. “For what it’s worth, I’m really glad we’re friends, too.”

Eijirou chokes up.

The smile doesn’t last long after that, and Eijirou’s sorry to see it go. Midoriya spends the rest of the morning dozing on his feet as they wait for the rest of the class to arrive, apparently deaf to Iida’s worried fussing about getting proper rest every night. (And really, has Iida *met* Midoriya? Guy wouldn’t know a proper night’s rest if it jumped up and bit him.)

Eijirou chances a glance over his shoulder when they’re all settled in on the bus, and he can’t help but grin a little at what he sees. The engine isn’t even warm yet, and Midoriya’s conked out on Todoroki’s shoulder. Utterly dead to the world. It is undeniably adorable, especially when Todoroki looks so *confused* about it.

He ends up staring long enough for Todoroki to glance up and notice him. Eijirou flashes him a grin and a thumbs-up, and the two of them share a commiserating look from halfway across the bus.

Midoriya may be strong as hell, but that just means looking out for him has to be a team effort.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks everybody for being so patient with me over NaNoWriMo!

CW: aftermath of trauma, death of a childhood friend.

Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

SO! MUCH! ART!!

brushstrokeapocalyptic

kemdoodles

bean-soupp

yuni-corn

qpenguin98

submission

actually-deku

Also, if you haven't seen it before, there is a fantastic fanfic by kazzarole with Tododeku and ghost Izuku and it's fantastic and you all should read it!

And as always, this story has a TV Tropes page!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuku doesn't dream, and that is a rare luxury for him. He falls asleep almost the moment he sits down next to Todoroki, out like a light before he can even register the gentle rocking of the bus.

He's vaguely aware of something warm pressed against his face, familiar soft laughter around him, and voices talking amongst themselves in the far, far distance, but for the most part he drifts in darkness. Someone pokes him at some point, but it's not enough to bring him back up.

A hand on his shoulder, shaking him lightly but firmly, is nearly enough but not quite.

"—doriya? Wake up!"

"Todoroki, what did you even do to him?"

"I didn't—"

“It’s probably because he’s on your warm side—*kero*. I bet he’s super comfortable right now.”

“Awww, so cute!”

A light swat against his head jerks him awake, and Izuku is suddenly and bewilderingly aware of things once more. The bus has stopped moving, and he sits up to find most of the seats empty. Todoroki’s still next to him, watching him with a perplexed expression. Ashido, Tsuyu, Sero, and Kaminari are standing around them, all three of them grinning.

Ashido stifles a laugh. “Sleep okay?”

“Sheesh, Midoriya, we thought you were *dead*.” Sero shakes his head at him. “Did you take Nyquil or something before you got on the bus?"

“Who hit me?” Izuku mumbles, rubbing the crust out of his eyes.

“Um… nobody?” Ashido answers. “We were all just standing here trying to get you up. You did kinda jerk awake, though, so maybe you dreamed it.”

“We’re at the first rest stop,” Tsuyu tells him. “If you have to go to the bathroom, now’s the time.”

Izuku doesn’t, thankfully, but he probably should anyway. “Okay, I’m up, I’m up. Sorry, Todoroki.”

“It’s fine,” Todoroki assures him. “Let’s go before Aizawa gets annoyed.”

When Izuku hears the words “rest stop” he imagines a few sparse buildings for shade, some public restrooms and vending machines, *maybe* a gas station. He sees none of these as he takes a few wobbly steps off the bus. Instead, they seem to have pulled over at a small viewpoint overlooking the forested mountains. Aside from the road, the only structure around here is the fence at the edge of the overlook. He sees Rei there, arms out as she crosses the fence like a balance beam. Iida Tensei is here too, and seems to be spotting her. Izuku’s eyes run over a few other scattered ghosts, Aizawa’s two hangers-on among them, before he becomes sure. This is not a rest stop.

The phrase “logical ruse” creeps into his mind, and he is suddenly very glad that he doesn’t actually have to use the restroom.

There is no rest stop here. There is, however, a welcoming party, and Izuku finds his previous sleepiness falling away in an instant when none other than the Wild Wild Pussycats burst in on the scene to announce themselves.

Or… well. Half of the Wild Wild Pussycats, anyway. Half of them plus a… small child?

Izuku can only gape at first, because maybe he hasn't actually woken up. Maybe he's still on the bus, two seconds from drooling on Todoroki's shoulder, and this is a vivid hallucination.

Whatever. The Pussycats are *really cool.*

"That's Pixiebob and Mandalay!" he blurts out, maybe to Uraraka, or maybe to no one in particular. "The Pussycats are one of the four hero teams that founded the Union Affairs Office, years ago. They specialize in mountain res… cue…"

Izuku blinks, voice trailing off, as he notices that more ghosts are here now. They do that sometimes, pop in out of nowhere like they've been there the entire time. As Aizawa continues introducing the Pussycats as… assistant instructors or something—Izuku finds himself sidetracked, looking over at the boy who arrived with them.

He's small, silent. Most of his face is hidden under the brim of his cap, so that all Izuku can see from here is the unhappy downward turn of his mouth. Izuku's eyes flicker upward again, to the two figures standing behind him. At first he can only squint and wrack his brain, because there's something familiar about those two—of course there is, when those vests are obviously hero gear, and no one knows heroes like Midoriya Izuku.

And then recognition strikes, and Izuku can only hope it doesn't show on his face. It's not recent news by any means; the story is nearly two years old by now. But the deaths of pro heroes stay fresh for so long, and Izuku can remember hearing about how the Water Horse duo fell.

They don't notice him staring—too focused on talking to each other, on watching over the boy.

They must have had a kid, he thinks, numbly. Did he know that? Did that come up in the news reports, or did it get buried in all the memorials and sensationalizing?

He tears his eyes away from them just in time to miss catching the

boy's sharp glare, just in time to hear Mandalay say, "The kittens who don't make it before twelve-thirty don't get to eat."

Crap, I wasn't paying attention.

A handful of his classmates are running back toward the bus, and Izuku almost follows them before he realized that many others aren't, including Todoroki and Yaoyorozu and Iida. Izuku decides it's probably safer to take cues from them.

"What'd she just say? I spaced." He mutters it out of the corner of his mouth to Todoroki, and tries to look innocent when Aizawa glances at him like he heard.

"Base of the mountain," Todoroki replies, quietly without drawing attention, which is why Izuku asked him and not Iida. His friend is already shifting his feet, settling into a better stance. "Something tells me we're not getting there by—"

Pixiebob plants her gloved hands on the ground. Pillars of earth shoot out from beneath them like pistons, launching all twenty of them off the overlook and out toward the surrounding woodlands.

Yep, same shit as always.

Over the wind in his ears, he hears Mandalay shouting after them—something about a forest of magic beasts, and he is still very, very glad he didn't have to go to the bathroom yet. He rolls as he hits the ground, coming up with a few bumps and scratches but otherwise unharmed.

"What was that about a forest of magic beasts?" Kaminari asks. "Sounds like something out of an RPG."

"Ugh, I landed weird," Ashido mutters. "What *was* that?"

"Pixiebob's quirk." Izuku gingerly stretches a kink out of his back from the rough landing. "It's called 'Earth Flow', it allows her to manipulate natural earth. She'll probably turn the environment against us." His notes on the Pussycats are in *Hero Analysis for the Future, Volume 8*. It's been a while, though; if he'd known they would be involved, he would have dug the thing out of his closet and brought it along.

"Do any of the Pussycats control animals?" Tsuyu asks him. "She did say magic beasts, so…"

“I think it’s just Pixiebob we’re up against,” Izuku replies, and the words are barely out of his mouth when the first magic beast emerges from the thick trees.

It’s hard to miss, being the size of a small elephant. It has tusks and everything.

“Or… not,” Izuku mutters. “Shut my mouth, I guess.”

Except Kouda’s animal-commanding quirk does nothing, and Izuku sees dirt clods falling from its thickly-built body. It’s not just dirty, but made of the dirt itself.

He sees it. Todoroki sees it. Iida sees it. Bakugou sees it.

His ears roar with blood, with the sound of Iida’s engines, the groan of Todoroki’s ice, Bakugou’s explosions, and the rush of wind as he activates Full Cowl without even a thought. The four of them tear through the earth-beast in a heartbeat, and the game is on.

The flash of dark hair and a white nightshirt alert him to Rei’s presence at his side. As he vaults through the thick woodlands, Izuku finds himself looking to Iida, who paces himself to keep from leaving the others behind or running headlong into another trap. Tensei is with him, marking his progress, shooting a grin across to Izuku when he sees him looking. Izuku grins back, then looks to Todoroki and—

Surprise makes him trip and stumble, and only a quick grab from Rei prevents him from falling on his face. He recovers his footing, then stares at Todoroki, stares *past* him at—no. Not yet. He’ll address that later.

Pixiebob throws obstacle after obstacle at them. It’s ridiculous; she isn’t even here, and yet she’s fighting them nearly to a standstill. The path is much longer from where it had looked from the viewpoint. If they had been traveling unhindered, they still would have had to rush to make it by noon.

It is, to put it mildly, utter chaos.

They set a precedent with that first blow, and Pixiebob responds accordingly. For every earth-beast they take down, several more rise up in its place. With multiple attackers to face at once, the whole class is forced to break off into smaller groups to deal with each beast individually. The path ahead is unclear; beneath the treetops it’s so much harder to see where they have to go.

The moment Izuku finds breathing space, he looks around to take stock of things. Bakugou is running on ahead, as per usual; Izuku can't see him, but he can hear the direction of the explosions. Weaknesses are beginning to show; Aoyama already looks queasy from firing off too many beams, Satou only has so many sugary snacks on him, and with the constantly shifting landscape, Sero's having trouble maneuvering like he usually does.

He could probably make it if he ran ahead like Bakugou; he's fast and strong and agile enough to make it through. But that's not how he does things, is it?

Izuku hurtles feet-first at the beast that Aoyama is currently up against, smashing through its neck and taking its head clean off. As it staggers from the blow, his classmate runs clear, and nearly collides with Tsuyu.

They're not good at collaborating all that the same time, he realizes. So much of their training has relied on competition.

And then, out of the corner of his eye, something moves oddly. Rei grips his arm in a silent warning, and Izuku turns his head to look.

Tsubasa flies on broken wings, his bare feet and hands gnarled into talons. He's following Izuku, vanishing and reappearing in his peripherals.

"Midoriya!" someone shouts.

Distracted, Izuku almost slams into another earth beast, but drops and tumbles out of the way at the last moment. When he glances back again, Tsubasa is gone.

Not entirely gone, though. Izuku keeps seeing him as they make their way through the forest.

Gradually, he starts to sense the difficulty curve. Ever since they effortlessly smashed past the first beast, Pixiebob has increased the pressure on them. It's not just more monsters; she's using tactics as well: herding them off course, changing the environment to get them lost, dividing their forces and scattering them in the woods.

They've been out here for hours. Izuku doesn't know exactly how long, because his phone is dead. He doesn't know where about half his class is. It's the start of summer, and none of them knew to bring water with them when they left the bus.

“Deku, are you okay?” Uraraka touches his arm.

They have a breather, just for the moment, and Izuku is using that time to… well, breathe. Long, steady, controlled breaths, just to get his pulse steady. He tries to reply, but only a dry croak makes it out.

With her hand still on his arm to steady him, Uraraka looks over her shoulder and calls for Todoroki. Izuku follows her gaze, and finds his friend standing by Tsuyu. At Uraraka’s call, he looks up and jogs over.

“Cup your hands together and hold them out,” Todoroki tells him. Izuku does so, and Todoroki drops a grapefruit-sized chunk of ice into his hands, then melts it to cold liquid with a touch.

Izuku drinks as quickly as he dares, and manages four decent mouthfuls before the rest of the water dribbles out between his fingers. “Thanks,” he says.

“Figured out that trick when I was six,” Todoroki answers, and doesn’t elaborate. Izuku’s mind takes him to the obvious reason why a six-year-old Todoroki would need to know how to make his own water, and simply nods.

He glances over Todoroki’s shoulder and meets the eyes of the ghost that wandered over to follow him. Their owner looks back, silently challenging him to say something, but this isn’t the time nor place for that, because the breathing room Pixiebob allows them never lasts very long.

At that moment, the ground explodes as if by mortar fire. An earth beast twice the size of a rhino tears itself out of the ground, and they’re off and running again before more come. And more *do* come. Eventually, Izuku looks up to a darkening sky and realizes that they’re not making it for lunch by a long shot.

It’s getting on to evening, and their goal at the base of the mountain is in sight, when it happens.

Pixiebob’s attacks are beginning to let up, but with how hungry and exhausted they all are, it hardly matters. It’s dark, and Izuku’s vision is swimming when he blinks and realizes he’s lost the others.

“Rei,” he rasps. “Rei, which way—”

Tsubasa pounces.

Izuku is aware of very little, with his exhausted brain fighting just to take in individual pieces of information. Things like dirt and stones and roots pressed up against his front, the taste and smell of soil, the cold weight of a dead boy on his back, the sound of broken wings beating—

He struggles, spitting out soil and leaves, and gives a choked cry of pain as claws rake his back. Sharp, stinging pain lights up between his shoulders, on the back of his neck. The back of his shirt is shredded for sure, and this is familiar—why is this familiar—?

Rei screams, and the weight is torn from his back. Izuku crawls away as quickly as he can, flipping over just in time to see Rei struggling with Tsubasa. Both of them are contorted, twisted, and warped, both pale and black-eyed and screaming and it's so hard to tell which is which like this.

Another scream, and Tsubasa vanishes. Izuku grunts when Rei cannons into his chest, wrapping her arms around him, pulling him up to his feet and away from this place. Izuku reaches over his shoulder and feels the back of his shirt torn in several places.

He's bleeding, but only a little. They're only scratches. They'll probably close up by the time he gets to the camp.

The others might see.

Rei pulls on him again, rattling at him in distress, and Izuku forces his leaden feet to move. She leads him back to the class, and he hangs at the edges, hoping the others will be too preoccupied to notice the state of his back.

It's well into evening by the time they reach their goal. Izuku stumbles to a halt near the front of the pack, self-conscious but not overly worried. He's not the only one that got through that with damaged clothes, and there's enough of his shirt left to hide most of the welts and scratches that Tsubasa left on his back. Aizawa-sensei is there waiting for them with the two members of the Pussycats, plus the little boy from before.

Luckily, the whole "anyone who doesn't get here by noon doesn't get to eat" thing was a lie, and there's an audible sigh of relief from Kaminari, Ashido, and a few scattered others.

"Don't know why anyone's surprised anymore," Izuku murmurs to

the people nearest to him, who happen to be Todoroki and Uraraka.

"Yeah," Uraraka agrees. “I’m pretty sure starving us would be both counterproductive *and* illegal.”

Todoroki blinks at them, then looks away without replying as Aizawa-sensei comes forward to address them.

“Midoriya.” Aizawa-sensei’s voice is not quite sharp, but it’s about as hard and unforgiving as a stone wall, and he always manages to say people’s names in such a way that makes it sound like they’re instantly in trouble for something. Izuku snaps to attention, equal parts confused and worried as he mentally runs over his entire day to see if he can pinpoint what his teacher might be upset about—

His mouth drops open.

“No,” he says out loud. Somewhere behind him, he hears Ashido giggle quietly.

“We had your things brought up while you all were making your own way here,” Aizawa says with a steely sort of calm. “And I’m fairly sure we were clear on what was and wasn’t appropriate to pack.”

“Sensei, I *swear*.”

“So imagine our surprise,” Aizawa continues dryly. “When your duffel bag started *moving*.”

From her perch on his homeroom teacher’s shoulder, nestled comfortably in the folds of his capture weapon, Mika curls the tip of her tail and blinks her single eye slowly. Izuku has honestly never seen her look this pleased with herself before.

“I didn’t bring her on purpose,” he blurts out. “I’m so sorry, I don’t know how she—she must have sneaked into my bag before I closed it, but I didn’t even—I didn’t—oh my god, I didn’t even bring anything to *feed* her with, I—”

He’s in the process of working himself into a proper panic. He can see Mandalay hiding the lower half of her face behind one of her paw-shaped gloves.

“We have supplies for it, in the dining hall kitchen.” she says, and her voice shakes oddly. “We may as well make an exception for circumstances, but it *will* be your responsibility to take care of her

while you're here, on top of your training—Midoriya, was it?"

"Yes," Izuku says weakly, face burning, He wonders if he can ask Pixiebob to let the earth open up and swallow him.

"Um, excuse me!" Like a godsend, Uraraka pipes up and brings everyone's attention away from him. "Ms. Mandalay, is that boy with you?"

It's a relief when the focus is off of him, but Izuku's heart sinks as he looks to the child again. This time the boy notices and glares back at him, unaware of the ghostly hands resting on his shoulders.

"My nephew," Mandalay replies. "Kouta, come say hi. You'll be seeing a lot of each other while you're here."

This time, when Izuku looks to the pair of ghosts following the boy, they see him staring. The woman blinks, looks to her husband, and then back to Izuku.

"You see us?" she asks. Izuku gives the tiniest nod he can. Then he startles, because over the course of that brief exchange, the little boy has approached him.

For a moment, Izuku can only stare dumbly at him, at a loss for what to say. Ghosts and poltergeists and even grieving friends he can handle, but he has never had to talk to a living orphan before.

"Um." He tries to keep his voice gentle. "Hi—"

Kouta punches him in the crotch.

By some miracle, Izuku manages to not curse in front of a child, but he still ends up on his hands and knees, wheezing with pain.

"Kouta—!" the ghost woman cries out.

"Sorry, sorry!" There are cold hands on him, steadying him before he can faceplant in the dirt. The dead man speaks closer to his ear. "I'm so sorry. Are you all right—?"

Above him, Kouta's voice sounds tight with rage. "What the *hell* are you looking at me like that for!" he hisses. "Why don't you mind your own goddamn business!"

Izuku barely hears Mandalay scold Kouta as he's gently helped to his feet. The Water Horses help to steady him until Iida and Uraraka

move in to check on him.

Aizawa glances at him with a raised eyebrow. Izuku quietly wishes for death, but all he gets is a quick once-over before his teacher apparently decides he's fine, deposits his cat into his arms, and dismisses the class.

Izuku manages not to limp as he catches up to the Pussycats and their small charge. "U-um, excuse me?" Mandalay gives Kouta an exasperated look and motions toward Izuku, clearly prompting an apology, but Izuku shakes his head. "No, I just wanted to say—"

"I don't care," Kouta snaps, and ignored Mandalay's furious attempts to quiet him. "You're just some loser trying to be a *jackass* hero, and I don't want your stupid pity." He turns and storms off before Mandalay can take in a breath to scold him.

"We're sorry," one of the Water Horse ghosts says, while his wife hurries after Kouta. "We're so sorry, he doesn't mean that—"

"I-it's fine, I didn't mean… um." Izuku suddenly feels foolish, standing in front of famous pro-heroes, scruffy and dirty with a cat in his arms. "Y-you said the cat food was in the kitchen, right? I-I was just…"

"We already fed her while you were on your way," Mandalay assures him. "But I can show you, for future reference. And—"

"Thank you," Izuku says, and he knows it's rude to cut her off like that, when she probably wants to apologize for Kouta's behavior, but Izuku's dignity has taken enough of a beating already. She seems to understand, and beckons him toward the dining hall.

It's only as the class settles in that first evening, girding themselves for tomorrow's training, that Izuku can really take stock of things. His back still smarts and stings from where Tsubasa clawed him. He's not looking forward to the baths tonight, when people might see and ask questions, and quickly changes his shirt so that no one will notice the angry red welts through the rips in his old one. It means one more dirty shirt, but it's a sacrifice he's willing to make.

What's more, hanging back in the boy's dorm to change and get Mika situated allows him a chance to address his earlier… observation. It had been a bit of a shock, seeing this particular ghost here of all places, and now that things have calmed down and Izuku is alone, he can finally question it.

Izuku can't imagine why Hino of all people would come, but here he is, as pale and sullen-looking as ever.

"Okay, I gotta ask," Izuku says, on his way to the dining hall. Hino apparently sees this coming, and reluctantly hangs back for him. "Literally what are you doing here?"

"What's it to you?" Hino scoffs at him. "Just because you can see me doesn't mean you have any say in what I do."

"Just curious, I guess," Izuku says with a shrug. "You seemed pretty dedicated to making Endeavor's life miserable, and I didn't think you'd need a break." He pauses. "Not that there's anything wrong with needing a break. I guess even ghosts can get tired."

"I'm not tired," Hino grouses. "Now that the number-one son's out of the house for the summer, the dickhead's gonna spend all his time working. And unfortunately, his job usually involves preventing people from dying, and I'm not *that* much of an asshole. So, I've got nothing better to do. I'm *bored*."

Rei blows a loud, wet raspberry.

"You must be great at parties," Izuku says, and early nwalks straight into one of the Water Horses when he rounds the corner.

Izumi—that's their name. It's Mrs. Izumi who meets him now, and her face lights up the moment she sees him.

"Oh, there you are!" She appears by his side in an instant, and Hino promptly vanishes before he can be dragged into another conversation. "I just wanted to apologize, for what Kouta did earlier. You're all right, aren't you?"

"I've had worse," Izuku says honestly. "It's probably just cosmic punishment anyway."

She looks confused. "What?"

"Nothing. Can I help you with something?" He lowers his voice as he enters the dining hall. "If there's a message you want to pass along to Kouta, I'll do my best."

"I-I…" Mrs. Izumi looks hesitant. "N-no, not exactly. I just wanted to meet you properly, and apologize for my son. This must be your quirk, right?" Izuku nods as he slides into an empty seat between Uraraka

and Iida, and the ghostly heroine steps back. “Could we talk, later? After you’re done?”

Izuku glances at her quickly and murmurs, “Sure, I can talk before I go to bed.”

“Did you say something, Deku?” Uraraka asks.

“I said can you pass the rice?” Now that he can smell food, his hunger comes roaring in. Izuku tucks in to his heart’s content. It’s all very simple food, a lot plainer than what he gets at home or in the school cafeteria, but it makes no difference to his empty stomach. Glancing around the dining hall, he happens to spot Kouta once, walking by with a box of vegetables. His parents follow him all the while, one on either side, and he catches their eye as they pass. Mr. Izumi’s hand is on his son’s shoulder.

Izuku finishes eating quickly, and excuses himself to the baths.

In the shower, he clenches his teeth as he scrubs down, and the soap and hot water sting against the scratches on his back. He hasn’t seen Tsubasa since they got to the training grounds, and he’s glad of that. He gets to the boy’s bath before any of the others, and his eyes water as he turns his back to the edge of the bath and lowers himself neck-deep into the hot water. The scratches aren’t anywhere close to serious; the blood had clotted by the time he was finished running through the woods. But still, it’s better to be safe than sorry, and clean, hot water will kill any chance of infection.

Gradually the pain fades to nothing, and the tension leaves him as his classmates gradually filter in. There aren’t any ghosts around now; Iida comes in by himself, Hino is nowhere to be seen, and even Rei has gone off to explore the camp. Conversation washes over him like comforting white noise. Bakugou’s voice is among them, but it’s only one among many, and he’s much farther away than Iida and Todoroki and Ojiro and Kaminari. His stomach is full, the hot soak is working the aches out of his muscles, and he’s surrounded by people he likes.

It’s… nice, feeling like this. He knows for a fact that training is going to be just as hellish as today was, if not more so. But for now, in this moment, things are nice.

He doesn’t realize that he’s dozed off until his head drops forward, dunking his face right into the water. He comes snorting and spluttering, to the sound of good-natured laughter all around him.

“Dude, did you just fall asleep?” Kirishima asks.

Izuku blinks water out of his eyes. “Nope.”

“Really? ‘Cause you kinda just dunked yourself.”

“Wanted to,” Izuku says, a little defiantly.

“I'm pretty sure you almost drowned just now,” Sero tells him.

“Yeah, I’ll have to try harder next time,” he says dryly, and realizes his mistake when everyone within immediate hearing range gives him a bunch of worried looks. Embarrassment curdles the warm contentment within him, and he slips lower into the water. “…Too dark?”

“Little bit,” Kirishima lifts his hand out of the water and holds his thumb and forefinger a hairsbreadth apart. “It’s cool, though, I mean you do you.”

Kaminari sinks down until the water laps at his chin. “Guess it makes sense that you’d have that kinda sense of humor, Midoriya.”

The others laugh it off, but Izuku decides that’s enough of that, and he isn’t risking a repeat performance. He grabs the towel he left at the edge of the bath and drapes it around his shoulders as he rises out of the water, covering the scratches on his back, and wraps the smaller towel around his waist. After a bit of maneuvering, he ends up sitting near Todoroki at the bath’s edge, letting the water lap up to his knees. It’s still warm, but not so hypnotic that he risks drifting off again.

Of course, Mineta waxing poetic by the barrier also helps wake him up.

“You know, when you get down to it, it’s not about the food, or the pleasure, or the company,” his classmate is saying, hands on his hips as he regards the high wall. “No, there’s something greater to be gained, just beyond this wall.”

Izuku squints at him. “Mineta, literally what are you talking about.”

Mineta leans against the wall, presses his ear to it and listens, and Izuku remembers with a jolt that the girls’ bathing area is right on the other side. “We’re in luck—our bathing schedule overlaps with the girls. I don’t know if it’s just an accident, or destiny—”

“Are you *serious* right now,” Izuku says flatly.

“Nothing in this world is more serious than this!” Mineta doesn’t even bother looking over his shoulder, or lowering his voice. The girls can probably hear what he’s saying.

Iida steps in to scold him, but Mineta blows him off, calls him a prude, plucks two sticky purple balls from his head and starts scaling the wall with frankly astonishing speed.

Izuku is already out of the water, ready to shout a warning to the girls —maybe Yaoyorozu can make a pole or something to knock him off— when a small figure appears at the very top of the wall, right as Mineta reaches it.

The look on Kouta’s face is a sullen scowl. “If you want to be a hero,” he says flatly. “Then why don’t you try being a decent human being first?” And with one shove, he knocks Mineta off the wall just short of the top.

Izuku sees it from the water’s edge. Kouta's hand is still outstretched as Mineta shrieks and grabs at empty air, and in one of Mineta’s flailing hands is one last adhesive ball. It’s pure bad luck that puts the two together, and Mineta’s panic keeps him from letting go. Kouta manages one shriek before he’s yanked off the wall.

“***Kouta!***”

No one but Izuku hears the Water Horses cry out, and he’s already moving. Mineta lets go of the ball stuck to Kouta’s hand and flails again as he lands on Iida. Izuku catches Kouta before he can land headfirst on the hard ground.

“Are you okay?” he asks, but Kouta is too busy cursing like a sailor to hear him. “Kouta—Kouta, what hurts?”

“It’s my leg!” Kouta snaps, looking far more furious than frightened. “I hit it when that stupid *jackass* pulled me off the wall!”

Speaking of whom, Iida’s yelling at Mineta, and Izuku realizes belatedly that he lost the towel around his shoulders in his haste to reach Kouta. So much for avoiding awkward questions.

“Midoriya?” Iida pauses in his tirade to look at him. “We should probably take him back to the Pussycats…” He looks at Kouta uncertainly. The boy ignores him and nurses his sore leg.

“It’s fine, I got him,” Izuku says. He retrieves his towel from where it landed on the ground, and ties it around his waist over the smaller one. “You… keep doing your class president thing, I can take him.”

“I can walk,” Kouta says petulantly, but Izuku sees him wince when he tries to stand up.

“You shouldn’t try,” Izuku tells him. “It might be broken.”

“It’s not broken and I’m fine,” Kouta insists, but he doesn’t squirm again when Izuku lifts him up and heads toward the entrance to the bath. He’s almost clear when—

“Hey, Midoriya, is your back okay?” Ojiro asks. “Those scratches look pretty nasty.”

“I’m fine, I just got caught alone by one of Pixiebob’s earth beasts,” Izuku answers, and leaves before anyone can question him further.

Kouta falls into sullen silence, clearly unhappy with the current situation. Maybe it would have been better to let one of the others take him, but… well, too late for that now.

“Sorry about Mineta,” he says.

“I don’t want to talk to you, so shut up and get this over with.”

Izuku swallows his frustration. Vehement rejection really shouldn’t sting this much; after all, he’s used to people being determined to dislike him. Has he really been in UA long enough to be spoiled for positive attention?

It’s not just that, though. Kouta doesn’t like him, doesn’t want to like him, but he seems to have a problem with heroes in general, going by what he said earlier. Growing up, Izuku never heard anyone say “dumbass heroes”, because everyone knew that heroes were cool. It was a fact of life. A hero was someone to admire. And yet this boy, born to two heroes himself, seems to hate the very idea of them.

“Thank you,” Mrs. Izumi says, and Izuku nods. "This wasn't exactly how we wanted a conversation to go, but..."

"I understand," Izuku says out loud. Kouta scoffs.

“He’s a good kid,” Mr. Izumi adds. “He really is, it’s just…”

“It’s our fault,” Mrs. Izumi whispers. “We should have tried *harder*.

But… we died.”

Her husband shakes his head. “I don’t regret that,” he says. “I can’t regret it. We stopped him. It cost us our lives, but we stopped him. If we hadn’t done what we did, then a lot of people would have been killed in our place.”

“People called it brave,” Mrs. Izumi says, and her voice is so bitter that Izuku can’t stop “It was,” from slipping out.

Kouta looks up at him warily. “What’d you just say?”

“Thought you didn’t want to talk to me,” Izuku says, and regrets it a little when Kouta shuts his mouth and looks away again.

“It doesn’t matter if it was brave,” Mr. Izumi tells him. “Not to our son, anyway.”

“The only thing that mattered was that we weren’t coming home,” Mrs. Izumi says. “So, while everyone said that we were brave, and that there was no nobler way for a hero to die…”

Kouta's father reaches out and tries to touch his son's head, but his fingers pass through without stirring a single hair. “People forgot that it was supposed to be sad, too.”

Izuku doesn’t expect a thank-you from Kouta when he drops him off, and doesn’t get one. He does get a cup of tea from Pixiebob, though, and as they hover out of earshot while Mandalay tends to Kouta, he makes a few prompting questions that draws the same story out of her.

“A kid’s parents are his world,” Pixiebob tells him quietly. “But the rest of the world was praising their actions, celebrating them…”

Izuku’s gut twists. He remembers that. He remembers joining in on that. He remembers thinking, *I wonder if they’ll stay long enough for me to be able to meet them*.

“He’s probably not too fond of us, either,” Pixiebob adds. “But Mandalay’s his only relative, so he has nowhere else to go.” She pauses. “We’ve, uh. Adjusted our workload since then. We used to branch out into combat missions on occasion, but not anymore. We can’t risk it, now that we have a kid to think about.”

“But he’s only related to Mandalay?” Izuku says.

Pixiebob smiles wryly at him. “Mandalay’s as good as family to the rest of us,” she says. “That’s how it is, with good hero teams. That’s how it should be. Kouta’s her kid now, and that makes him *our* kid, all four of us. And that means making the adjustments we need to make sure he doesn’t end up with no one, no matter what the public says.”

“That’s messed up,” slips out before Izuku can stop it.

“Hm?”

"Not you," he says quickly. "I mean, the public. It’s like…” Izuku puts his empty cup back on the tray. “It’s like the whole world was trying to convince him that it was a good thing that his parents died.”

Pixiebob’s mouth twists. “Yeah. Don't get me wrong, I don't regret my choices, and I'll always admire the sacrifices that heroes make. But to that kid, the idea of heroes is senseless to the point of being unbearable, and I can't really blame him for thinking that.”

“Well, nothing’s broken,” Mandalay says, loud enough for them to hear. “You just banged it pretty bad. It’ll leave a nasty bruise, but you’ll be okay.”

Kouta doesn’t answer.

“It would’ve been worse, if you hadn’t caught him,” Mrs. Izumi says. “Thank you.”

Izuku excuses himself shortly after that.

By the time he gets to the dorms, clean and dry and dressed for bed, he finds most of his classmates already there, and nearly all of them are converged around his cat. Even the girls are here—Ashido is cackling as she watches Mika climb on Kouda’s head, and several different sets of hands are trying to pet her at once. At first Izuku worries that she might get overwhelmed, but Mika seems to be enjoying all the attention.

“Oh, there you are, Midoriya!” Yaoyorozu waves to him. “Is Kouta all right? Iida told us what happened.”

“He’s fine, just bruised his leg.” Izuku glances around. “Where’s Mineta?”

“Iida dragged him off to Aizawa-sensei after you left, and he isn’t back yet,” Kirishima answers. He shoots Yaoyorozu an uncomfortable look. “We’re *really* sorry about him.”

“It’s fine,” she sighs. “We could hear some of you trying to stop him, and we appreciate that.”

“That’s why Kouta was up there in the first place,” Uraraka says. “Mandalay had him play lookout for us.”

“Frankly she shouldn’t have had to,” Iida remarks. “You know, I’ve heard rumors that Aizawa-sensei has the highest expulsion rate of any other UA teacher. I have to wonder what he sees in Mineta, because quite frankly his motives for becoming a hero seem… poorly aimed.”

“Probably because his potential isn’t rock-bottom,” Kaminari points out. “I mean, he did pass the practical final pretty much single-handed.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me,” Sero groans.

“The fuck’s it matter if his potential isn’t rock-bottom?” Bakugou snaps. “How the fuck’s he supposed to be a hero if all he does is hump his way out of his problems like a shitty dog?”

“That’s mean, Bakugou!” Ashido calls out. “What did dogs ever do to you?”

“By the way, Midoriya, is your back all right?” Iida asks. “It looked sort of like something clawed you.”

“Nothing like that,” Izuku lies. “I just got caught by one of those earth-beasts earlier. I ended up getting dragged, and it scratched me up a little, but it’s nothing serious.”

“Oh, good.” His friend is visibly relieved. “Be careful from now on, will you? We’re outdoors, and even the smallest injuries can still become infected if you don’t tend to them properly.”

Izuku tugs up the neck of his shirt and nods.

Shouto dawdles going to bed.

Things have settled down. Lights-out approaches, and the girls return to their own sleeping area. Shouto sits up for a little while longer, because Midoriya’s cat has claimed a place on his lap (on the left side,

naturally) and he doesn't have the heart to move her just yet. He's not the only one; the air is filled with quiet conversations as his classmates put off going to sleep.

Midoriya's sleeping pallet is next to his, and his friend is still up as well, messing around with his phone. Someone throws a pillow at him, catching him in the side of his head, and Midoriya grabs it and puts it down next to his own. "You're not getting that back," he says, without looking up from his phone.

"Go to *bed*, Midoriya," Kirishima whisper-shouts. "You already fell asleep in the bath today, dude."

Midoriya hurls the pillow back, and puts enough of his quirk behind the throw to nail Kirishima in the face. "I'll be fine," he says, but turns off his phone anyway.

"No you won't," Kaminari snickers. "'Cause we're *never* gonna let you live that down."

Midoriya rolls his eyes and grumbles a little as he straightens out his bed. In the process, he notices Shouto watching the whole exchange. "Stop grinning like that," Midoriya tells him, and that's how Shouto finds out that he's starting to smile, just a little bit. "It wasn't *that* funny."

"It was a little funny," Shouto answers, and for once he has to work to keep a straight face. He can't help it; the mental image of Midoriya faceplanting in bathwater is amusing. "I know it was a long day, but you might want to get more sleep if you want to survive the summer."

Midoriya purses his lips, and it's almost a frown but not quite. "...I don't usually sleep that well at night."

"Oh." Reluctantly, Shouto lifts the cat out of his lap and gets into bed. Mika, not to be deterred, makes herself comfortable in the crook of his shoulder. "How come?"

Midoriya flops down on his back. "I dunno. It's dark and creepy and—mostly silent, and there's nothing distracting me from…" He gestures vaguely. "Y'know. Thoughts and stuff. I worry about stuff way too much, even if it isn't worth worrying about, and I end up not… not feeling safe, I guess." He shrugs. "It's pretty much impossible for me to sleep if I'm not somewhere I feel safe."

And Shouto knows that can't be quite true, not when he's seen

Midoriya fast asleep just today. “Well it’s obviously not *completely* impossible,” he points out. “You didn’t seem to have any trouble falling asleep on *me*.”

“How about that,” Midoriya says. But he doesn’t try to argue, and Shouto hears his breathing even out less than a minute later, so he figures his point is made.

Chapter End Notes

> CW: implied past child abuse (withholding food and water), attempted sexual harassment, child endangerment, discussion of past death/orphaning.

Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

Artwork!

biteitwhenitssoft (2) (3) (4) (5)

a-pocketful-of-art

the-llamas-art

cricketmilk

cupid709

eclipsed-pendulum

doodlesofall (2) (3)

littleblueberryartist

vivi-set-this-on-fire (2) (3)

thtartfrt

spacerocknroll

uglybeanshit (2)

inyuji

theequilateraltriangle

emptyinkbottle

And as always, this story has a TV Tropes page!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Sekijirou Kan, Class 1-B's homeroom teacher, walks outside before dawn, it's to the sight of Aizawa standing in the road, watching the back of a bus as it drives away. There's a coffee mug in his hand, its contents long gone cold, and Aizawa barely bats an eye when his colleague steps up beside him.

There's a moment of contemplation, of Sekijirou looking at his mug, then at the expression on Aizawa's face, then at the slowly disappearing bus, before realization hits.

"Holy crap. So you actually did it."

Aizawa shifts, tries to take a sip, then pulls a face and pours the rest out. "You almost sound surprised."

"You held out pretty long," Sekijirou says. "We were starting to wonder if your entire class might make it through the first year. I think a few of us owe Kayama some money now."

"Fantastic." Aizawa's voice is caustic. "Good to know this is benefiting her and amusing all the rest of you."

Sekijirou winces. "…I'm sorry," he says. "It must not have been an easy decision."

"I don't know why everyone seems to think it is." Aizawa rounds on him. "I don't know why my string of bad luck with students has convinced everyone that I can decide to accept my own complete failure on a whim."

"Aizawa—"

"I let students go when they have zero potential." Aizawa scowls off in the direction the bus has taken. "If they have even a shred of it at the start, then that's something I can work with. I thought I could work with him."

"Who was it?" Sekijirou asks cautiously. "One of the remedial students, I take it."

"No. Mineta Minoru."

Sekijirou's eyebrows shoot upward. "Oh."

"I was planning to place him in the remedial class the moment he put a toe wrong," Aizawa says. "But it wouldn't do anything."

"You sure?" Sekijirou asks. "I mean, you've mentioned him before, and so has Kayama, but… he's a teenage boy, you know. It happens, but it doesn't mean he can't learn."

"That's what I thought. That's what I was hoping." Aizawa shakes his head. "But there was too much I was already letting slide, and this

time it led to Sousaki's nephew getting hurt. He's fine," he adds quickly. "But it was a close thing, and all Mineta had to say about it—his response to the fact that his actions put a *civilian child* in danger—was to call that child a 'self-righteous little shit'." He pauses at Sekijirou's sharp intake of breath. "He probably didn't mean for me to hear that. But I did, and I realize now that I can't help him. And I can't in good conscience allow him to move forward." He rubs his face, looking tired. "Bakugou I can work with, Bakugou's problem is that he's proud and spoiled, but at least there's some part of him that wants to do good. Mineta never wanted that, so there's nothing I can do for him."

"Sounds like it's for the best," Sekijirou tells him gently. "And—hey. There are other promising kids out there. Kids with their hearts in the right place. This just means there's more space for them to move up. Those are kids you can help."

"Yeah," Aizawa says. "Yeah, I intend to."

Shouto doesn't mind early mornings as a concept.

In his father's house, he loathes them. In his father's house they begin with heavy footsteps approaching his door, with sitting bolt upright so he won't be caught lying down, with an ungenerous bare-bones breakfast and whatever basic training his father can fit in before releasing him to go to school. It means closing his eyes through the first hours of the day before he steps out the door and lets himself breathe again.

Today, it begins with Iida's voice booming throughout the boys' dorm, followed by a ragged chorus of soft groans of protest. Shouto sits up with more care than he normally does, because this time he has a cat on his chest. On one side, Kaminari attempts to burrow further beneath the covers. On the other, Midoriya flops over and kicks him in the side. Everyone is groggy and sleep-tousled, and mornings have never felt so bizarrely comfortable.

"I feel really weird," Midoriya says over breakfast, which is simple but far less spartan than Shouto is used to.

"Weird how?" Uraraka asks. She's eating with her eyes closed, too sleepy to keep her eyelids up.

Midoriya doesn't seem to have that problem. "I don't know," he says thoughtfully. "I think I might be dying."

Uraraka lists to the side until she bumps his shoulder. “Deku, nooooo.”

“You look fine,” Shouto informs him patiently.

“I know. I feel fine, too. It makes me suspicious.” Midoriya frowns. “Am I floating? I feel kind of floaty.”

Ojiro is sitting near enough to overhear, and lets out a quiet chuckle. “Midoriya, have you seen your face lately? I could swear those bags under your eyes have gotten smaller. You’re not dying, you’re well-rested.”

Uraraka chokes out a sob that Shouto is fairly sure is fake. “I’m so proud,” she says.

“I’m jealous,” Sero groans. “I always take forever to sleep when I’m somewhere new. First night of camping is always the worst. How do you even do it, Midoriya?”

Midoriya shrugs and mumbles and fills his mouth with food to keep from having to answer.

“Speaking of things that make me lose sleep at night,” Uraraka pipes up. “Where’d Mineta go?”

At this question, all the other girls jump. Ashido scoots back in her seat and checks under the table. Jirou lifts her feet up to sit cross-legged.

Shouto glances to his other seat neighbor. “Yaoyorozu?” he asks.

She lowers her chopsticks, lips pursed. “He was sent home, apparently. First thing in the morning—Aizawa-sensei had him get up even earlier than the rest of us. Iida and I were informed last night, but we don’t know the details.”

“That’s weird,” Kaminari remarks. “He wasn’t even in the remedial class. And I don’t think he did any worse in that forest obstacle course than the rest of us.”

“Aizawa-sensei will be making announcements after breakfast.” Iida pitches his voice over the rest of the chatter. “I’m sure whatever needs explaining will be disclosed then.”

By five-thirty, the whole class is gathered outside and dressed in gym uniforms, most of them still rumpled and yawning. Shouto is

reasonably awake; it's hardly any earlier than he's used to, and thus far the morning has been much slower-paced. The only others who seem unaffected by the hour are Iida, Yaoyorozu, Midoriya, and Tokoyami, though in the latter case Todoroki just can't read his expression past the beak and feathers.

"Good morning everyone," Aizawa greets them. "Your training begins today. This summer, we will be reinforcing what you learned last term, as well as pushing you well past your physical and mental limits." A few of them wince. "The purpose of this training will be to strengthen your quirks, and to prepare you for the examinations for provisional licenses." Aizawa's eyes narrow. "And so, we will be preparing you for life-or-death scenarios, aggressive and hostile enemies, and in other words, real hero work. A provisional license will authorize you to perform that work, so we'll be spending this summer making sure you earn it." His eyes rove over the class. "And on that note—Mineta will not be continuing his training this summer."

Shouto sees more than a few perplexed looks pass back and forth among his classmates.

"Nor will he be continuing in the fall," Aizawa adds, and the confusion turns to shock.

"Wait, what?" Kaminari blurts. "But he passed the final! He wasn't even in remedial training!"

"As of last night, Mineta Minoru is no longer a student in the U.A. Hero course," Aizawa goes on, ignoring Kaminari's outburst. "The behavior that he displayed last night was unacceptable for a hero in training, and has been unacceptable since he began." Aizawa's face is like stone. "Let me be clear. I was lenient in dealing with his missteps—far more lenient than was called for. *I will not make the same mistake twice.* While you are in my class, and while you are attending U.A., you will show your fellow students, your teachers, and your peers the respect that is due them. You will respect boundaries. You will respect consent. You will afford your classmates common courtesy. If you are incapable of that, then you have no place in my class, in this school, or in this profession."

Yaoyorozu is standing next to Shouto, and he sees her shift to stand taller. A sigh of relief can be heard coming from the empty space above Hagakure's shirt collar.

Shouto shifts his weight from foot to foot, burying his sudden dread

deep. Mineta had been unpleasant, and privately Shouto isn't too broken up to see him gone; his social graces aren't the best, but even he couldn't miss how miserable the girls were around his now-former classmate. But in spite of that, Mineta was clever and strong in his own right. He had a good understanding of his own quirk, he was smart enough to make the top ten in academics, and he made it through the USJ attack just like the rest of them. He managed to pass the final while his partner Sero is stuck with remedial training, meaning that Mineta had more or less passed that test on his own. And even with all those qualities and abilities, he's still been kicked out on attitude and character alone.

Shouto knows his strengths; he knows he's clever and strong and skilled with his quirk and good in academics.

He's not quite as certain about his character.

"We'll be upgrading your quirks," Aizawa-sensei tells them, and that's exactly what they proceed to do.

It's grueling, of course, but on the bright side, the other half of the Pussycat team finally joins them. From what Izuku can guess, while Mandalay and Pixiebob welcomed Class 1-A yesterday, Ragdoll and Tiger had been busy getting Class 1-B settled in. But now everyone's together, it's still midmorning and Izuku feels like he could flop down and pass out where he stands.

He doesn't, of course. That would defeat the purpose.

There are forty—well, thirty-nine, now—students in these woods, and only four trainers besides their homeroom teachers. But the Pussycats are professionals, and their quirks are just as suited for wide simultaneous training as they are for mountain rescue operations. Pixiebob's earth quirk turns the landscape into specialized training fields and obstacle courses. Mandalay's quirk is Telepathy, and lets her mentally broadcast instructions over multiple students at once. Ragdoll's Search lets her keep track of up to one hundred people at once, including weaknesses. And Tiger…

Tiger is…

Hm.

Izuku's mouth tastes like dirt and sweat, because that's all he's eaten since breakfast. He's long given up fretting over the sweaty sting in his

eyes, because it's been hours since it started and Izuku is quickly learning to prioritize. As a rescue hero, Tiger's quirk lets him stretch and flatten his body to get through narrow spaces as needed. As a teacher, he's like an unholy amalgamation of All-Might, Ms. Nana, *and* Gran Torino. He's loud, he's strong, and he *does not let up*.

Not that Izuku would want him to, of course.

Your quirk doesn't need strengthening, Nana had once told him. *You do.* She's still right. Gran Torino helped him find a way to harness One For All more consistently, but five percent is still a measly five percent. That's a kitten sneeze to the kind of power he's seen All Might wield with his little finger—*without* breaking it. That's not something Izuku can catch up with overnight. Sometimes he wonders if he'll even reach one hundred by the time he graduates. But that's Future Izuku's problem. Present Izuku's problem is *I wonder if I can nudge it up to six.*

"Push it to the limit!" Tiger tells him when he lands on his ankle wrong and ends up limping for a few minutes.

"Push it to the limit!" he says while Izuku struggles to get his lungs working again after he misses a block and takes a blow to the gut.

"Push it to the limit!" he says, shortly before sending Izuku sprawling facedown in the dirt for the fiftieth time that day.

Rei helps him up, asks him if he wants her to give Tiger a hard time, and scowls petulantly when he shakes his head. This is good. This is a good thing.

He pauses to catch his breath when Tiger moves on to help Satou. His arms aren't shaking yet, so he activates Full Cowl and drops to do a set of push-ups while he waits. "What do you think?" he mumbles, with minimal lip movement. It's awkward to do pushups with his head raised to look at her, but it's the only way to see what she signs.

That boy is here, she tells him. *The one that punched you. He's watching you and some of the others, but mostly you.*

"Oh." His chest feels tighter at that.

The one with wings too, she says, and Izuku has to pause before he sprains his wrist by accident. *I don't see him all the time. When I do, he's watching you. I don't know why. He won't talk to me. I don't like him.*

“He’s just scared,” Izuku mumbles, then lifts the hand that he almost messed up and folds it behind his back. Adjusting his weight, he continues his pushups on one arm. “You know, you don’t have to stay with me. I haven’t figured out how to train my first quirk yet. I don’t want you to get bored.”

Instead of answering, Rei simply frowns and watches Tiger train with Satou. *Let me try something,* she answers.

“Define ‘something’.”

I want to try to touch him. Really touch him, I mean. I think I can do it.

Izuku’s eyes widen, and he finally pauses and puts one knee down. “How can I help?”

I don’t know.

When Tiger comes back to him, Izuku throws himself into a spar. It’s not his best, because he’s trying to keep one eye on Rei at the same time, but the point of this exercise is raw strength, not fine precision detail.

Rei hovers at the edges of the fight, pacing and circling like she’s deciding where to pounce. She reaches out from time to time, clawing and swiping, but her hands go through Tiger the same as they always do.

Izuku keeps One For All activated, reveling in the feeling of lightning in his veins. When Rei drifts close, he feels the hairs on his arm stand on end. The static charge makes his skin prickle, until he dodges a blow from Tiger and steps into Rei’s space.

She blinks away, vanishes, and reappears behind Tiger, reaching out with a pale hand for his broad shoulder.

It’s a fraction of a second. Just an instant. But Izuku is watching, always watching for weaknesses, just like Nana taught him, and he sees Tiger’s split-second glance over his shoulder. Izuku throws a punch and catches him in the side, before he has the chance to manipulate his body around it.

Tiger’s roar of laughter almost deafens him, and Izuku is rewarded with another ungentle fall. He glimpses Rei on his way down, and finds her staring at her hand with a wide, wide smile on her face. When he staggers back up, Tiger is still grinning at him, and Izuku

arranges his tired face into a grin of his own.

As Tiger's booming voice calls him back to attention, movement catches his eye in the trees beyond their training ground. Kouta lurks in the shadows, half-hidden behind a tree trunk, and meets his eyes with a dark scowl. Before Izuku can react, the boy turns and vanishes into the underbrush with the ghosts of his parents always at his side.

Ragdoll doesn't like to toot her own horn, but she's pretty sure she's keeping busiest for the least reward. Tiger's giving the kids face-to-face lessons, Pixiebob gets to show off and wow everyone by turning glades and ravines into obstacle courses, and Mandalay's talking into everyone's heads. That's how it usually is; Tiger, Pixie, and Mandy are the face, the muscle, and the voice of their operation, and little ol' Rags gets to be the brains and the eyes.

It's a good job. Her *favorite* job. And the best part about it is knowing nobody else can do it but her. Eraserhead and Blood King brought them thirty-nine kittens, and Ragdoll can keep tabs on them from any vantage point. She *is* the vantage point. Pixiebob looks to her to know who needs what, Mandy looks to her for where to send instructions, and Tiger…

Well, Tiger mostly does his own thing. That's Tiger for you. But she can give him advice on who needs strengthening and how.

(That's a complicated question, though, because everyone here needs strengthening, in every possible way.)

Ragdoll smiles to herself and taps Mandy to whisper in her ear. "Tell Todoroki-kun he's about to pass out from heat exhaustion," she says. "Ms. Kendou needs to work on her footwork, Shiozaki's never going to last long in a fight if she stays in one spot and doesn't move, Ojiro's sprained his ankle and it's not the kind you can just walk off…" The list goes on. Ragdoll is good with names; she has to be, with a quirk like hers. She has to talk slow, too, or Mandy won't have enough time to transmit it all.

Not that she blames her. Once upon a time, it was all a bit much for Ragdoll, too, back when she was a teensy little kitten-in-training herself. When she was little, one of the happiest days of her life was figuring out where the off-switch was, because without that, her mind wasn't the pleasantest place to be. Even before she got her range up to a hundred, where everyone was and what they were doing and where they were weakest was an awful lot to cram into one head. It left her

so busy sorting through it all that she missed things right in front of her nose.

Now? Now she misses nothing.

She's not even looking for him, and she still feels it—Midoriya Izuku, Class 1-A, wandering away from Tiger. He's out of breath with sore muscles and a stiff right hand, and he's sidled away from Tiger while he's distracted with a few of the others.

Ragdoll wrinkles her nose. Naughty, naughty. It's so close to lunchtime, too. If he plays hooky she'll have to tell Eraserhead, and he's been prickly ever since he sent one of his kittens home.

She's just leaning over to tell Mandy so her partner can send him a quick mental slap on the wrist, when she tracks his progress and realizes he's heading straight for them.

"Something wrong?" Mandy asks.

"Hold that thought!" Ragdoll chirps back, and darts away to head him off.

She means to sneak up on him, but he scampers up to her before she has the chance. "Oh, Ms. Ragdoll! I was looking for you—are you busy?"

Ragdoll blinks, narrows her eyes, and squints at his face for a moment. He's not lying. Not skipping out, then. Just taking a break from Tiger, and that's silly. Who would ever need a break from Tiger? Tiger is a *delight*.

She always shows her teeth when she smiles. "Don't be silly," she tells him. "I'm *always* busy."

(Tetsutetsu's metal shell is breaking—he's reached his limit, and so early too. Tsunotori stepped on a jutting stone, and now the frog of her hoof is bleeding. Asui's thirsty, Aoyama's about to lose what's left of his breakfast—)

"I was hoping to ask you something," Midoriya says, and wipes some of the dirt and sweat from his face. That's a nice little scar he has—nothing wrong with that eye, though. It's just a mark. "You said your quirk lets you see weaknesses."

"That's right!" she says. She's starting to remember now, because Pixie

told her—Midoriya likes heroes, likes quirks, and likes finding answers to questions more than anything else.

“Are there any that jump out at you?” Midoriya asks her. “On me, I mean.”

“Hmmmm.” Ragdoll taps her chin. Is this cheating? This feels like it ought to be cheating, but then this isn’t a test, it’s training. And she’s supposed to be a teacher right now, isn’t she? If she’s a teacher and it isn’t a test then what’s the harm in helping him find the answers? “Weeeell… the biggest thing jumping out at me is that right hand of yours.”

He wrings the hand a bit. “It’s just a little stiff.”

“Well, you know what they say, a little goes a long way, doesn’t it?” She taps one of her paw gloves on her chin. “Besides that… you’re big and loud and in-your-face, and that’s all well and good but you don’t have the muscle to back it up yet.” She tilts her head to look at him sidelong. “Which is why skipping out on Tiger to ask me questions you already know the answers to might not be the smartest move, don’t you think, Midoriya-kun? Pixie says you’re smart. You already know your weaknesses, don’t you.”

He blinks at her. “What about mental ones?”

“Hm?” She tilts her head the other way.

“You’re right, I did know that,” he admits, a little sheepishly. “I know my, um, physical weaknesses, and I sort of know how I can get past them, too. But what about mental weaknesses? Can your quirk detect those, too?” Before she can answer, he pushes ahead. “Because I know what I have to do, but I don’t always know how to go about doing it. Sometimes it feels like something’s blocking me, and it’s not something like this—” He taps his crooked hand. “—or just how big my muscles aren’t. I feel like part of it’s how I think, and it’s harder to tell what that is and how to get past it. I was just wondering if you could, with your quirk.”

Ragdoll hums again, lets it drag out as she taps her foot in time to her thoughts. No one’s ever thought to ask her this before, besides Mandy when they were younger. “Mmmmno, ‘fraid not. My quirk deals in physical weaknesses only! Bum legs and broken arms and bad backs, you know.”

His shoulders slump a little.

“But! That doesn’t mean I can’t still answer your question. Because-because-because, that’s only what my quirk does. But *I* can do more than that!” He perks up at that, and Ragdoll mentally preens a little. She’s getting the hang of this teacher thing. (And Tiger *has* been wanting to take on sidekicks… maybe they could give it a shot!) “I’m a people person! Anything my quirk can’t see, I can learn to read without it. That’s how I knew you really wanted my help, and you weren’t just hiding from Tiger.”

Midoriya looks at her like that’s the strangest thing he’s ever heard. “Why would I want to hide from Tiger?”

This kitten should be careful, or Ragdoll might start to like him. “No idea! But tell me more about your mental blocks. Mandy might have Telepathy but I’m good with mind things.” (Bakugou’s wrists are giving out, and he needs a break. Yaoyorozu is hungry, and she can’t jump around and make things as fast as she could if she tried just a bit harder. Oh, and there goes Uraraka’s breakfast—some of it got on Monoma, and he’s hopping now and his balance is just *awful*—)

“How do you keep it all straight?” Midoriya asks, and for a moment Ragdoll wonders if he’s the one that has Telepathy, not Mandy. “It’s so many moving parts, isn’t it? So many things to keep track of. How do you go through it all and find what you need, instead of being overwhelmed?”

“Practice!” she replies. “Years of practice. There’s no quick way around that! But first I had to try. I blocked it all out at first, all those little things, and you can do that too, if you want, and just focus on what’s in front of you.” She clips the tip of his nose with her glove. “But then you miss all the good stuff, if you block it out. If you don’t want to miss it, you have to let it in. That’s what I did. I let it in, and my mind grew around it to fit it all in. Practice! Break up all the noisy things into smaller bite-sized things. It’s hard and it takes time to get good at it. It’s not something you perfect overnight.” It’s his own fault really, for asking all these questions and knowing things, finding things, learning all the things he can fit into that fluffy little head. But if he’s smart, he’ll get it all straightened out.

He looks thoughtful, which is good. Thoughtful means he’s listening. “That makes sense,” he says, and holds up his scarred hand. “What about things like this?” He pauses. “I don’t know if this is a question you can answer, but you know weaknesses, right? What about weaknesses that can’t be fixed? Because this can’t be fixed, and it’s my own fault, and—well, like you said, it’s just a little stiff but a little

goes a long way." He searches her face. "Is there a way to keep it from slowing me down, besides just strengthening the rest of me?"

Ragdoll crosses her arms to keep her hands from twitching. "Oh, that's a tougher one," she says. "But I do have an answer, and it's this." She leans forward a bit. "Not everyone's like me." He blinks at her, and she adds, "Not everyone can keep it all straight. You see?"

He blinks again, and then his eyes widen. Does he have it?

"It's like you, with mental weaknesses," he says thoughtfully. "You can't sense them with your quirk. So you can only rely on what you see. So if they see it *wrong*, then…"

Clever kitten. Ragdoll smiles until all her teeth are showing. "Lots of people like to pretend they don't have any weaknesses," she says. "And that's all well and good, but everyone knows that everyone has weaknesses, so even if you try that on someone who isn't me, they'll just keep looking and looking until they find it."

"But if they think they've found it, then they'll stop looking," Midoriya says, and the look on his face is sharp and thoughtful enough that he almost looks like a cat himself—all he's missing are slit pupils in his eyes. He wrings his stiff hand. "I can make them ignore this, and go after a weakness that isn't there."

"It takes a good liar," Ragdoll tells him. "Do you think you can tell a lie without talking?"

"I don't think I've tried it before." He smiles back at her with those sharp little cat's eyes, and all bets are off. Ragdoll *likes* this one. She feels like she could dance with glee, and manages to restrain herself to bouncing on the balls of her feet, but it's quite the close thing. Eraserhead is an amazing hero and a great teacher, and Tiger is her best friend who she loves with all her heart, but they have such one-track minds when it comes to strength because, well, *Men*.

She's still smiling as she sends him running back to Tiger. Ragdoll has always liked the clever heroes just a bit better than the powerful ones. Won't it be interesting to see one who's both at the same time?

"Lunch!" Eijirou doesn't mean to shout it loud enough to make both Aoyama and Hagakure jump, it just comes out that way. "Most important meal of the day!"

“Pretty sure that’s breakfast,” Ashido tells him.

“I’m pretty sure it’s more useful if you shove it in your mouth and shut the fuck up,” Bakugou growls. Eijirou can see his hands shaking from across the table. Aizawa used him in a quick demonstration to show everybody how little their quirks have developed since the first day of school, and judging by the near non-stop explosions since this morning, Bakugou took it a little personally.

Eijirou shrugs and compromises, by putting food in his mouth but continuing to talk. “Seriously though, I was with Tiger for about an hour this morning and I’m pretty sure he tried to kill me.”

Ashido pats him none too gently. “There there, you’ll live,” she assures him.

“At least the food’s good,” he sighs.

“The food’s boring as shit,” Bakugou snaps.

“It’s not that bad!”

“It’s fucking bland!”

Ashido bursts out laughing. “Bakugou, you’re talking to the guy who once ate drywall on a dare!”

“*Ashido!*” Eijirou almost wails, but it’s quickly drowned out when Bakugou stops eating to guffaw at him.

“Are you serious! You fucking *idiot!*” And Eijirou can’t be too upset now, because Bakugou’s laughing like he actually thinks it’s funny. “When the fuck was this?”

“We knew each other in middle school,” Ashido says, a little smugly. “We were in our third year.”

And that, Eijirou realizes, is a perfect reminder and segue into that favor he promised Midoriya. “What about you, Bakugou?” he asks. “What was your friend crowd like before U.A.?”

A look of distaste crosses Bakugou’s face, and he shrugs. “Pff, *what* friend crowd? I just had a couple of dickheads following me around because I had the best quirk in our entire class.”

Ashido wrinkles her nose. “Sheesh, Bakugou, do you even remember their names?”

“No.”

“How about before that, then?” Eijirou presses. “Like, grade school? C’mon, you can’t tell me you never had *any* friends. Or was it just Midoriya?”

At that, Bakugou bridles. “What the fuck? Fuck no he wasn’t my only friend! We weren’t even friends, he just followed me around back then and he wouldn’t leave me alone!”

“C’moooon, Bakugou, tell us!” Ashido drums the table lightly. “I wanna know what kind of crazy kids hung out with li’l Bakugou!”

The look he gives her could split rock. “Never say that again.” He rolls his eyes. “Fuck, it was long ago and I haven’t heard from any of them for years. There was this kid that could regrow his fingernails? Weird little shit. Some kid with wings—Tsubasa or something.”

“Tsubasa?” Eijirou tries not to look like he’s frantically jumping on the name. “That sounds kinda familiar, what was he like? Maybe we had a mutual friend!”

“He had bat wings, so that wasn’t as useless as it could’ve been.” Bakugou shrugs. “Again, he mostly just followed me around, and after grade school he fucked off to a different middle school and I never saw him again.” Eijirou’s heart sinks, and for a moment even Bakugou seems not quite unbothered by it. “Eh, what do I care. We only knew each other ‘cause his grandpa was Deku’s pediatrician.”

Eijirou blinks. “Wait, really?”

“Yeah, I think Tsubasa wanted to be a doctor too or some shit. Well no, fuck that, he wanted to be a hero, but that was his backup plan. He would not *shut up* about how smart his fucking grandpa was. It was annoying as shit.”

“Awwww.” Ashido elbows him a few times. “Look at you, getting all nostalgic. It’s kind of a cute side to you!”

“Eat me.”

Eijirou turns back to his food, and hopes that this little information will be enough for Midoriya.

Izuku’s mind buzzes as he grazes his way through lunch.

Ragdoll was right, for all that she didn't quite know what he was talking about. So far he's been keeping his first quirk apart from his hero training, or only letting a bit of it leak through at a time, and that's due for a change. It won't be as easy with his quirk as it was for hers, because the dead are still their own people, and if he is going to involve them, then that takes convincing.

He stabs his rice with his chopsticks, a little moodily. The only one he can consistently practice with is Rei, because the other ghosts present are either devoted to someone else like Tensei and the Water Horses, unstable and erratic like Tsubasa, or… well, the only one left is Hino. Izuku isn't even sure where Hino is most of the time. How is he supposed to let it all in and learn to accommodate it all if there aren't enough ghosts around when he actually has the chance to practice?

"Everything all right, Midoriya?" Yaoyorozu asks, gently fending Mika off from her food.

"Just thinking over training," Izuku answers. "It's a lot to chew over."

Iida pauses, chopsticks halfway to his mouth. "Was that a pun?"

"I… guess so? Sure."

"I know what you mean," Yaoyorozu says. Her plate is piled even higher than Izuku's, and for good reason; she looks a great deal thinner than she did that morning. Mika sniffs at it again, until Yaoyorozu lifts her off the table and deposits her on the bench. She must notice Izuku staring at her plate, because she flushes pink. "I have high metabolism," she says sheepishly.

"I-I wasn't judging," he says, embarrassed. "Sorry, I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable—that actually makes sense, with your quirk. That mass it takes to create—I mean, with the Law of Conservation of Matter…" His voice trails off.

"You're, um, right," Yaoyorozu replies, and her blush fades as she pets Mika. "Sorry for getting defensive, I just keep half-expecting Mineta to… never mind. But you're right; the more I eat, the more I can create."

"Is it the same for your quirk?" Izuku asks, turning to Todoroki.

For a moment his friend looks startled at being abruptly included. "Er, eating doesn't really make a difference."

“No, I mean—your right side,” Izuku says. “The water has to come from somewhere, right?”

“A lot of it comes from water vapor in the air,” Todoroki answers. “But also from me. I can’t produce nearly as much ice if I’m dehydrated. So I guess there is some comparison.”

From there, Yaoyorozu draws Todoroki into a discussion of quirk biology, and Izuku listens until he finishes his food. He gets up to take his dishes in, then checks the time. There are fifteen minutes left to the lunch period, and fifteen minutes is plenty of time to explore a little more, especially with Rei tugging at him and signing. *I found the boy with wings.*

Tsubasa lurks further in the woods, a pulsing mass of poltergeist-anger that bleeds into the air like toxic fumes. Izuku isn’t nearly as sensitive to it as Rei seems to be, but it still turns his stomach when he gets too close.

With Rei keeping watch, Izuku creeps closer, as slowly as he might approach a wild animal. He’s off the path, in the trees, and quite frankly glad of it. It means no one’s around when Tsubasa lashes out again.

Only one of his claws catches on Izuku’s arm before Rei drives him back. That’s good; it’s easy to explain away one little scratch.

“*Wait*—” But Tsubasa is gone.

Frustrated, he returns to the main path and rubs at the angry red welt on his forearm. “He’s following me, isn’t he?” he says. “He’s following me, and whenever I get close, he attacks me. Why? What does he have against me? Is it because he used to bully me? Is he just stuck in the habit?”

Rei pulls a face and twirls her finger by her ear.

“That’s very helpful,” Izuku sighs.

His frustration doesn’t last long, because Mika meets him halfway to the dining hall, and Izuku stoops to scoop her up in his arms. It’s hard to stay mad with a cat warm and purring against your chest, even when it’s the height of summer and you don’t really need more heat.

“He isn’t dangerous, is he?”

Mr. Izumi materializes out of the trees, and Izuku adjusts Mika in his arms before he answers. “Tsubasa-kun? I don’t know. So far the only person I’ve seen him get rough with is me.”

“We’ve tried talking to him,” the ghost tells him. “But he’s…”

“I know,” Izuku says, and drops his voice. “He hasn’t gone near Kouta, has he?”

“No, but I still worry. I don’t like the feel of him. Do you know how he died?” Izuku’s stomach turns as Mr. Izumi speaks. “It… it must have been something awful, for him to end up like that.”

“I don’t know,” Izuku murmurs. “I’m trying to find out. If you happen to see him, or see anything notable about him…”

Mr. Izumi smiles. “I’d be happy to help.”

Izuku ends up spending the rest of lunch at the designated training area where he’s been with Tiger all morning, stretching out his sore muscles. It’s nearly useless, because Mika decides that now is the best time to start climbing him like a cat tower, and it’s very hard to stretch properly when he can’t stop snickering. After a few minutes he gives up and sits down to give her a thorough petting.

Rei tells him Kouta is coming before the boy comes storming through, swinging a long stick in one hand. Izuku sees him first, and sees the look of angry shock when the boy finally notices he’s there.

Not sure what else to do, Izuku continues to twirl a long bit of grain grass in front of Mika’s nose so she can bat at the seeded end. “Hey.”

“Fuck off,” the boy tells him.

Izuku has only one play in his book, but it hasn’t failed him yet. “Want to get in on this?” Izuku asks. “I don’t have any treats you can give her, but she likes people and she likes to play.”

“I don’t talk to lame-ass wannabe heroes,” Kouta says flatly.

“That’s fair,” Izuku says, heart sinking. “Do you hate cats too?”

Kouta keeps glaring at him, like he’s too proud to admit there’s something he doesn’t hate. Izuku puts down the grass and gives Mika a scratch under the chin.

“If you want to play with her while I’m training, you can,” he says,

and looks at Mika instead of at Kouta. “She might get lonely, otherwise.”

“You want me to watch your stupid cat while you’re too busy to take care of it your own damn self?” Kouta’s voice burns with blistering scorn.

Izuku winces. “She can take care of her own self, I think,” he says. “And you don’t have to, if you don’t want to. I’m just saying you can if you do.” He looks up a moment later, and Kouta is gone. A few of his classmates and students from Class B filter in, and Mika doesn’t run off until Tiger arrives to continue training for the afternoon.

Rei taps on his arm at one point, when he pauses for a breather, and points. Izuku follows the direction of her finger and finds Kouta in the distance, running through the trees toward the path, dragging a bulrush for Mika to chase.

Chapter End Notes

CW: past sexual harassment

Art Part 2!

valoohcs

untraditionaleagle

rip-aizawa (2) (3)

vitriolictineye

akcugrai

sinningbanana

cibsly

taloreliz

tamlins-stories-and-poems

casper-avery-art

kasaithederp

franqiworld

meteorblazes

spooky skelepuns

todosxdekus

Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

SPECIAL DOUBLE UPDATE!

That's right, this is the first of two chapters I'm uploading tonight. In... honor of our lovely boy Todoroki Shouto's birthday on the eleventh? Let's go with that.

Chapter Notes

MORE ART

sorryimshythings

emptyinkbottle

cricketmilk

nerdy-critter

heidi3399

coffee-and-ramen (2)

rainbowderpyarts

anandroidsartblog

doodlesofall

rip-aizawa

franqiworld

absolem0

fingertolips

And as always, this story has a TV Tropes page!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The evening of Day 2 brings a new challenge: after a long day of training, the students are expected to cook for themselves tonight.

As challenges go, it could be a lot worse. It turns out that food is an excellent motivator, especially for nineteen kids run ragged for a full day, and collaboration kicks off after only a few speed bumps at the beginning. It's easy to get past those once everyone figures out it's best to give Bakugou his space when he's holding a kitchen knife.

Izuku is used to helping around the house, and he's no stranger to making himself useful in the kitchen. Of course, he's a lot more comfortable with a kitchen stove than an open flame, but he can fetch and carry, organize ingredients, and help keep the prep areas clean. He puts out a food dish for Mika, a safe distance from the chaos, and finds ways to keep busy.

The class breaks off into groups, cooking several pots of curry to feed nineteen people. Yaoyorozu produces lighters, matches, and steel strikers to light cooking fires, but others take more direct approaches. Sero and Kirishima coax Bakugou into lighting a few with explosions, and Ashido drags Todoroki into helping with the rest. It's Izuku's own bad luck that he passes by Uraraka with clean cooking utensils as this is happening, because she nearly knocks them out of his hands with her enthusiastic cheering.

"Sorry, Deku!" she says, stopping to catch a spoon before it hits the ground.

"It's fine," he says, bewildered, as she places the utensil carefully back in his already full hands.

"Still not used to seeing Todoroki use his fire, I guess," she says with a shrug. "Guess Ashido isn't, either."

Izuku looks over to where Ashido is gleefully letting her inner pyromaniac show. Uraraka moves away from him to watch Todoroki work. When he finishes distributing utensils, he turns back to see Todoroki rekindling one of the fires while Uraraka leans her arm on his cooler right shoulder. He can't hear what Uraraka is saying from this distance, but there's a little grin on Todoroki's face.

The food is nothing special, and it's a little burnt on the bottom, but somehow it still manages to be delicious. It helps that he has Uraraka on one side and Iida and Todoroki on the other, squashed in shoulder-to-shoulder with his best friends. Mika hangs close to the table, charming some of his weaker-minded classmates into offering table scraps. Kaminari yells a bad joke loud enough for even Class 1-B to hear, and Izuku joins in the laughter.

He's come a long way from lonely lunches tucked away where bullying classmates and upperclassmen can't find him.

It's mostly by luck that he glances up at one point and spots Kouta sneaking off into the surrounding woods, head down with the brim of his cap pulled over his eyes. Izuku looks around, concerned. Do the Pussycats know he's wandering off? Has he even eaten anything?

He finishes quickly, scrubs off his plate and spoon, and fills another from one of the pots. The food has cooled significantly by now, so he nudges Todoroki. "Hey, could you warm this for me?"

"Sure, watch out." Todoroki passes his left hand over it a few times, then presses his palm to the underside of the plate until it's fully heated.

"Thanks." Izuku covers it with another dish, grabs a clean spoon, and sets off toward the forest trail at a quick pace.

"Where're you going?" Todoroki asks.

"Checking on Kouta," Izuku answers, and trots down the path with the covered plate in his hands. Rei joins him then, much to his relief, and he drops his voice to speak to her. "Keep an eye out for Tsubasa, okay? Last thing I need is him knocking this plate out of my hands. Are Kouta's parents around?"

As if on cue, Mrs. Izumi appears on the path, quite literally materializing out of the darkness. Izuku makes a beeline right for her.

"Did Kouta eat?" he asks, before she has the chance to get a word out.

Mrs. Izumi looks startled for a split second, and then her face softens with a smile. "He picked at his plate and excused himself early," she replies. "Come on, he'll be at his secret spot about now."

She leads him further down the path, then off to a branching trail that leads to a sharp rise. The path slowly widens as it leads up the side of a miniature cliff. Izuku's eyes adjust quickly to the dark, and he can see the end of the trail already. It's a shelf overlooking the surrounding trees, with the mouth of a cave set against the cliff. Kouta sits in front of it, staring out at the forest. His father sits beside him.

Izuku makes sure that his footfalls make plenty of noise, shuffling through sparse clumps of grass and stepping on a twig to make it crack. The last thing he wants to do is sneak up on Kouta by accident.

He waits until the boy's eyes are on him before he speaks.

"Hey," he says, stepping onto the wide ledge. "Brought you some of our extra curry, if you want it. I guess since we have nineteen people instead of twenty, the portions were a little off—"

"How the hell did you find me?" Kouta demands. He's on his feet, facing Izuku with clenched fists.

"Followed your footprints," Izuku answers. "Do you want food?"

"I don't want your damn food!" Kouta says hotly. "And I said I don't want to talk to you! What part of 'mind your own goddamned business' don't you understand?"

"Pretty much all of it," Izuku answers. "I'm terrible at it. Ask anyone." Mr. Izumi lets out a sad little *heh.*

"You're all stupid," Kouta goes on. "Getting all hyped up about your stupid quirks and your stupid j-*jackass* training. It makes me *sick!*" He looks close to tears, but he's not quite there yet.

"Sorry," Mrs. Izumi murmurs. "I'm sorry—thank you, for thinking of him. But maybe you should go…"

Izuku puts the plate down and steps away.

"What's the matter?" Kouta doesn't move toward the food. "Got nothing to say?"

"Would you listen?" Izuku asks. "You've already made up your mind about me, and heroes. Haven't you?"

"You're all crazy." Kouta's voice shakes. "Crazy or just stupid. C-calling yourselves heroes and villains, but all you ever do is kill each other and *die.*" Izuku sees his parents flinch. "Do you even *care?*" The pitch and volume of Kouta's voice rise. "Or are you just too busy bragging about your quirks and fighting each other to care that that's why you all end up *dead?*"

Izuku sees the ghosts' faces when Kouta says this, and it's too *close.* It's too close to Ms. Nana, guilt-ridden and crying in his room when she was the one hurt, she was the one who died alone and in pain. It's too close to how she hid and lied because she was too ashamed to admit she abandoned someone when she *didn't* abandon anyone, she died, and people need to stop forgetting that—

“There’s a difference.” Izuku’s voice is tight. “That’s not fair.”

“*What’s* not fair?” Kouta spits back. “You think you’re too good? Are you that full of yourself that you think you can’t—”

“I didn’t say it wasn’t fair to me,” Izuku says coldly.

“What are you talking about—”

“There’s a difference between dying and abandoning someone,” Izuku says, and he shouldn’t. He should turn around and walk away, he should leave this angry child to grieve, but he *can’t*, not when there are people who need his help, who no one knows to help but him. “If you hate heroes that much, does that mean you hate them too?”

Mrs. Izumi gasps sharply. Kouta draws back like he’s been slapped, and then he goes still, and Izuku can tell by the look on his face that it was the wrong thing to say.

“What about your aunt?” he asks. “Do you hate her? Do you hate the people taking care of you?”

“Shut up,” Kouta’s voice shakes.

“You seem to hate quirks, not just heroes,” Izuku goes on. “Do you have one?” The Water Horses both had similar quirks, he knows. “Do you have a power like theirs?”

“Shut up!” Kouta yells.

“Midoriya—” Mrs. Izumi murmurs.

Mr. Izumi tries to put a hand on his son’s shoulder. “He does, but—”

“They’re your family, like it or not,” Izuku tells him, and he can’t win, he knows he’s already made a mess of it, but he has to try. “Even if you’re angry, you can’t just—you can’t hate heroes without hating them too, and you can’t quirks without hating a piece of yourself—”

“*Fuck off!*” Kouta’s voice cracks. “Go away! Just go away and leave me the fuck alone! I don’t want you here and I don’t care!”

Izuku is already backing away. “Fine,” he mutters, then turns and walks away as quickly as he can.

Stupid, he thinks. *Stupid, stupid, stupid. You’re supposed to be good at this. Should’ve just kept your stupid mouth shut and dropped a cat in his*

lap.

If anyone notices that his mood has dropped when he returns, no one comments on it.

Izuku stirs and awakens an hour after he falls asleep. He peels open heavy eyelids to see lights moving amid whispered voices, and raises himself to his elbows. Thankfully, he's too groggy to be alarmed before he remembers that the remedial class has to stay up an hour later than the rest of them. Kaminari is closest; Izuku can see him on the other side of Todoroki's sleeping form, rummaging through his bag with a toothbrush in his hand and a flashlight held in his teeth. Farther away, Kirishima, Satou, and Sero are getting ready for bed as quietly as they can. Ashido must be doing the same in the girls' area.

He probably makes a noise, because Kaminari glances over, and the flashlight in his mouth shines into Izuku's eyes for a moment.

Kaminari *squawks*, the flashlight falls from his mouth, and he overbalances and falls in a heap on top of his bedding.

"Kaminari, what gives?" Sero whisper-shouts.

"Guys, you're gonna wake everyone up." Satou's voice is much quieter, and easily drowned by Kaminari's muffled spluttering.

"*Midoriya you scared the crap out of me.*"

Kirishima turns his flashlight toward him, and Izuku squints back and wishes he hadn't woken up, especially when he sees his classmate start. "Oh wow, yeah, that's a little creepy."

"Says the guy with shark teeth," Sero mutters.

"True," Kirishima says. "Don't worry about it, Midoriya, go back to sleep. That's pretty cool, though, I didn't know your eyes did that."

Izuku stares at him groggily, weighs his options, and decides that whatever this is, it's a problem better left for later. He lies back down, his classmates settle, and he shuts his eyes to go back to sleep.

He doesn't.

He isn't sure how much time passes before he comes to the conclusion that he simply can't. And that grates at him—there are few things more frustrating than being exhausted but unable to fall asleep.

Frustrated, he rolls on his back, opens his eyes again, and sits up. His eyes adjust to the dark, and he takes in the subtle shades of black to gray, the shapes of his sleeping classmates, the pale form of Iida Tensei at the doorway, peering in to check on them. Rei is at his side, holding on to the hem of his shirt. Their eyes meet for a moment before the ghosts move on again.

Izuku's hands itch to reach for his phone, more out of habit than any real desire, but if he starts watching internet videos, he's liable to wake someone up by accident.

Another urgent necessity makes itself known then—he has to go to the bathroom.

With a short sigh, Izuku gets up, slips his shoes on, and carefully picks his way through his classmates until he reaches the edge without disturbing anyone. With that, he ducks out of the room and heads down the hall. He passes by Tensei and Rei again, smiling when he sees the former fumbling through sign language to converse with her. The pad of paws behind him alerts him to Mika's presence, and he pauses to let her catch up before he goes out.

The Pussycats have no interest in babying them; the toilets are separate, smaller structures that require going outside to reach. Luckily, the summer nights are warm.

"The hell are *you* doing up?" Hino's hanging around outside, drifting aimlessly under the stars.

"Call of nature. What are you doing out here?"

"Nothing much. Nice sky. Had a tiff with Iida Tensei."

"That so," Izuku says dryly. "Anything I should know about?"

"Nah. He said I'm childish, I said he's got a rod crammed up his—well. I won't bore you with details. Grown-up stuff."

"You know something, Hino?" Izuku says before he reaches the nearest outhouse. "You strike me as the kind of guy who used to dye his hair just to piss off his parents."

Hino blinks at him, in a moment of wide-eyed bewilderment, before he grins and laughs out loud. "Hell, kid, what makes you think I stopped?"

When Izuku steps back outside with clean hands, Hino is gone, and he thinks for a moment that Mika is, too. But then he sees her farther off, standing in a pool of moonlight that turns her fur silvery. Her legs are ramrod-straight, her spine curved, and she watches the edge of the woods. Before Izuku can call to her, she races into the dark.

Izuku runs after her without thinking. This forest is the Pussycats' territory, and that means it's safe, but he has no idea what kind of wildlife there is around here, and Mika's been an inside cat her whole life, as far as he knows.

"Mika!" he hisses, and follows her down the path into the trees before he can remember that this is probably a bad idea. Best case scenario he gets caught and yelled at. Worst case scenario, he falls down a ravine and injures himself. Every now and then he hears her meow, and it keeps him on the right track, lets him know that she isn't far ahead. His night vision is good, has always been good—he knows this from so many late, sleepless nights—but it's hard to keep track of a cat running through the woods in the dead of night.

And then, without warning, he nearly trips over her. Izuku skids and stumbles to a halt, then turns to find her standing in the midst of a small break in the trees, back arched, fur standing on end. As Izuku watches her, he feels the hairs on the back of his neck prickle, as well.

It's happened enough times in his recent memory that he almost expects it a split second before it happens. It's just barely enough of a warning to turn and face it. His first instinct is to cry out, and his second instinct is to bite down on the cry before it escapes him, and he only manages a strangled noise before Tsubasa's cold weight hits him and knocks him flat.

"Tsubasa," he chokes out, and shuts his eyes as leathery wings buffet him. He waits for the claws to rake his skin, hopes they won't leave marks that he can't explain away. But instead of scratching him, Tsubasa's icy fingers wrap around his wrists and yank his arms away from his face.

"*Deku.*" Ink-dark eyes stare at him in the dark. Tsubasa opens his mouth, and black liquid trickles from his lips like blood.

"What?" His throat is constricting so tight he can barely breathe. "What do you want, Tsubasa? Please—I can help you, just—what do you want?"

Tsubasa doesn't answer, only chokes until more dark liquid flecks his

mouth.

Somewhere behind Izuku's head, Mika *howls*. Tsubasa flinches and draws back, and Izuku takes the opportunity to struggle up into a sitting position. Instead of trying to pull free, he surges forward instead.

The ghost hisses, flapping back, but his ruined wings can't seem to lift him anymore. Izuku forces himself onward until his feet and knees are under him, and he can reach forward and grab hold of Tsubasa's shoulders.

"Damn it, Tsubasa, what do you *want* from me?" Izuku shakes him, gritting out through clenched teeth. "You know me. You know my name. What do you want from me?" His eyes sting. "Why do you keep following me? How did you even find me?" Tsubasa goes still, wings fluttering uselessly. "How did you die? *When* did you die—"

Tsubasa's form convulses, turning to mist in Izuku's grip. He flickers—vanishes—reappears—*changes*.

Izuku is flat on his back again. He doesn't remember being struck, nor deciding to lie down. He's simply *there*, because it's the only thing he can be when there's a Noumu on top of him.

No—

Not just a Noumu—

Izuku's next breath shudders and catches on the way in. "*No*."

The ruined wings stretch wide enough to block the moon, torn and broken beyond repair. His body is bigger now, overgrown with distorted strength and mottled with burns that deaden tissue and expose the bone beneath. Black, leaking eyes remain the same beneath the exposed brain, dark red and wet with blood from Stain's knives.

The apparition stays that way for a moment more before it shrivels and breaks down to Tsubasa-kun again, but Izuku is already sobbing. He cries as Tsubasa grasps him, as he drags Izuku up again, choking and rattling all the while.

"*Deku*." Izuku opens his eyes, and finds Tsubasa's ruined face watching him. "*Deku, help*." It doesn't sound like proper words or a proper voice—more like retching than speaking. Tsubasa shakes him furiously, and when Izuku can't form a proper answer, he vanishes

again.

All he hears are crickets, and all he feels is the cool night wind and Mika's warm vibrations as she climbs into his lap.

Izuku gathers her into his arms, stumbles to his feet, and runs back the way he came. Mika didn't take him too far from the path, and from there it's a straight shot back to the dorms. Rei is there waiting for him, looking worried, but he simply hurries past her to his bed, buries himself deep beneath the covers, and lets exhaustion come crashing over him in a wave.

"Does Deku seem weird to you?" Uraraka asks during lunch.

"Since the day I met him," Shouto says. Across the table, Asui slaps her hand over her mouth to keep from spraying crumbs.

Uraraka rolls her eyes at him. "I mean more than usual. Just—look at him." She leans forward to catch a better view of Midoriya, who's sitting toward the end near Kirishima. He's been picking at his food for almost an hour, and there's a glazed, absent look in his eyes. "Yesterday he was doing so great, and now…"

"It's the second day, and they haven't let up on us," Shouto points out. "He's probably just not used to such a vigorous level of training."

"Does vigorous training make you jumpy?" Uraraka asks. "Because I tapped him on the shoulder earlier and he jumped into a tree."

Shouto blinks at her.

"I'm not kidding, he activated his quirk and just—up he went. Tiger had to pause the class because he was laughing too hard to give me advice on my form."

"Could just mean the training's working—*kero*," Asui suggests. "We're stretching our quirks, aren't we? I added ten centimeters to my jumps after yesterday. Maybe Midoriya-chan's stretching his limits so far he has to re-acclimate."

"Oh, yeah, I'm not worried about him hopping up into a tree," Uraraka says. "It's just, the fact that he seems pretty on edge today."

"It doesn't bode well for tonight's test of courage, that's for sure," Asui muses. "Have you asked him?"

“Of course I did! But he keeps dodging whenever I try to ask him what’s wrong. You guys haven’t noticed?”

“He hasn’t been talking to me much,” Shouto admits. “I just figured he was embarrassed.”

“About what?” Uraraka asks.

“He rolled halfway onto my mattress at some point,” Shouto says with a shrug. “I ended up on the edge. It’s no big deal—he kicked me a couple times the first night, so I figure he just moves a lot.”

Asui laughs softly. “I know the feeling. My sister’s a mattress pirate too.”

“Mattress pirate?” Uraraka echoes.

“Yep—*kero*.” Asui smiles fondly. “We had a campout in the living room once, just for fun. We made a blanket tent and brought out pillows and sleeping bags and stuff. When I woke up in the morning, Satsuki had crowded me right off the pillows I was sleeping on, and she was asleep in my spot. It was pretty funny at the time.”

“Your parents let you do that?” Shouto asks.

“Well, they work a lot, so a lot of times it was just the three of us,” Asui tells him. “As long as we cleaned up after ourselves, they didn’t really mind.”

Uraraka seems mollified, or at least distracted for now. “Aww, I always wanted younger siblings,” she says. “What other kinds of stuff did you get up to, Tsuyu?”

Shouto continues to not talk to Midoriya for the rest of the day, though it’s more the result of how training is structured than Midoriya actively avoiding him. Their quirks just aren’t that similar, so their training is structured differently. And even when they are within the vicinity of each other, there’s little time to stop and talk. Still, when they do cross paths, Shouto can see what Uraraka means. He’s always gotten the sense that Midoriya has more going on than he lets on, but his friend seems even more closed off than usual.

It’s not until dinnertime that concern overcomes Shouto’s well-established desire to stay in his own lane. He’s carrying a crate of vegetables to the food prep area when he sees Mandalay’s young nephew dodging through again. He happens to pass by Midoriya at

the fire pits, and turns to spit something at him. Midoriya turns his head away instead of answering, and Shouto sighs and changes course.

The boy runs off at Shouto's approach, but that's fine—it's Midoriya he wants to talk to. "Is something wrong?" he asks.

Midoriya starts, and Shouto remembers what Uraraka said about him being jumpy. "What do you mean?" he asks, without looking up from the firewood logs he's arranging.

"You've been acting odd," Shouto replies, and adjusts the crate in his arms so that he supports most of the weight against his hip. "At first I thought you were just embarrassed about being a mattress pirate, but —"

"Being a *what*?"

"But Uraraka says the same," Shouto continues, determined not to get sidetracked. "Did something happen? You've been quiet since this morning."

Midoriya looks him in the eye for a few moments, then turns back to the fire pit. "It's a couple of things," he says. "I had a bad dream, and it's been sticking with me."

"Oh," Shouto says. "What was it about?"

"The Noumu," Midoriya replies. "You know the one. With—with the wings."

"*Oh.*"

"Yeah," Midoriya says. "Oh."

Shouto hesitates. He's not good at this. He knows he's not good at this. But what's the harm in trying? "If—do you want to talk about it, or…?"

"I really—" Midoriya puts down the log and pauses. "—*really*. Don't want to talk about it. Trust me on that."
"Okay," Shouto says. His arm is starting to ache, and so is the pit of his stomach. It's certainly not the first time he's regretted not being faster, that night in Hosu. It's just been a while since then, that's all.

"I mean, I guess it's Kouta, too," Midoriya continues, and goes back to

stacking logs.

“Who?”

“That boy. Mandalay’s nephew.” Midoriya pauses to look around, but the boy is long gone. “I’ve talked to him a couple times.”

“That’s impressive.”

“Yeah.” Midoriya huffs out a short laugh. “He hates heroes. He hates everything about—just *society*, how it’s based around heroes and quirks, and frankly I can’t blame him, knowing his reasons.”

“That’s *really* impressive.”

Another huff of almost-laughter. “He’s angry. And he’s upset. And he has every right to be. I just wish I knew what to say to that. I feel like All-Might would know—Aizawa-sensei would probably know too. But I just come up blank. I just wish there was something I could do besides dropping my cat in his lap and hoping for the best.” He turns to look at Shouto again. “What do you think?”

Shouto adjusts his grip on the box again and thinks for a moment. “I don’t know.”

“Yeah, that’s okay—”

“I mean I don’t know what his situation is,” Shouto continues. “And I don’t think there’s anything you can really say to fix everything. If that was all it took, then it wouldn’t be that big of a problem.” He thinks of the muffled revulsion that still coils deep in his belly sometimes when he uses his fire, of the hatred that burns cold whenever someone compares him to Endeavor, of the deep sadness that still won’t leave his mother’s eyes, even when she smiles. “It takes more than that.”

“I know,” Midoriya sighs. “I just wish I could help him.”

“Like you did with me?” Shouto asks, because he did help, even if he couldn’t fix everything.

“I guess so.”

“Well… you don’t really know his situation either, do you?” Shouto says.

“I mean I do, sort of—”

“Is he the one that told you?”

Midoriya goes quiet, and Shouto waits until he hears a soft “No.” He’s not surprised; Midoriya must have talked to the Pussycats first.

“You only know his situation through the eyes of others,” Shouto says. “You know about mine because I told you about it—because I chose to involve you. He didn’t have that choice, so anything you try to tell him will only feel like an intrusion. As far as he knows, you’re just some stranger trying to tell him how he should feel.” He sees Midoriya’s shoulders tighten at that.

“That makes a lot of sense,” Midoriya murmurs.

“I guess if he hates heroes, then maybe all you can do is try to give him a reason not to,” Shouto says. “And if you can’t tell him, then show him.” He shrugs again, and continues walking. “That’s just what I think, anyway. If anyone can find the right way to butt in, it’s probably you. That’s kind of your thing.”

Midoriya stops avoiding him after that.

The stupid green-haired jerk shows up at Kouta’s secret base again.

Kouta hates him. He hates everything about him, from his stupid green hair to the dumb scars on his face and on his hands. He hates his voice and his fake smile, he hates that stupid vacant look in his eyes, and he hates that he knows from Mandalay that the jerk’s name is Midoriya. He doesn’t want to know the jerk’s name, because he’s just a stupid jerk who runs his mouth and is probably going to die anyway, especially if he’s stupid enough to get himself scarred up when he’s still just a kid.

“I told you to go away,” Kouta says. The jerk shrugs, barely looks at him, and leaves another covered plate of food on the ground. Kouta tenses up, ready for another stupid comment or fake smile or—or—

If Midoriya talks about Mom and Dad again, Kouta’s going to hit him. Harder this time.

But all Midoriya says is “Have a good evening. Don’t stay out too—ah, forget it.” And then he turns around and starts to leave.

For a second, Kouta stares after him. “W-what?” he says when he finds his voice again. “Is that all you have to say?”

The jerk stops, and his arms cross and twist a little, and he turns around again. “I guess… I’m sorry.”

Kouta scowls at him, because this sounds like pity, and the last thing he wants is pity.

“I upset you yesterday. And I didn’t mean to. I want to help, but I also don’t really know what you’re going through, so it was pretty stupid of me to try to tell you how you were feeling, or how you should feel.” He shrugs. “That’s all. Hope you like the food, it’s beef stew.” And then he’s gone.

Kouta stands glaring after him until he can’t see him anymore. He stomps his foot, kicking dust after him, and shouts swear words until he feels better.

The stew is still warm.

Ashido’s piercing wail is heartrending as Aizawa-sensei drags the five unfortunate remedial students off for a surprise lesson. She, Kirishima, Sero, Satou, and Kaminari look devastated, and Izuku’s heart goes out to them all. For the rest of them, the day’s training is finished, dinner is eaten, and the dishes are clean, which means it’s time for the test of courage.

“Maybe he’ll let them join in on a different activity later?” he murmurs to Rei, who shrugs and continues to hug his arm. Since his run-in with Tsubasa last night, she hasn’t left Izuku’s side.

She isn’t the only one, either. All ghosts are more or less accounted for, besides Tsubasa. Tensei has been cheering his brother on all day, Narita’s hanging around to watch the test of courage (Mrs. Kitayama’s off watching over her son, and didn’t come on this trip in the first place), and the Izumis were with Kouta when Izuku left him, which isn’t likely to have changed. Even Hino has been hanging around all day, though for what, Izuku isn’t quite sure.

“It’s kind of impressive,” Izuku remarks under his breath, just loud enough for the ghost to hear him. “I would’ve thought you’d get bored by now.”

“Meh.” Hino snorts. “Beats hanging around listening to Suzuki fret herself to a second death. Or watch Okumura drift around and mope.”

“Oh. How is he, by the way?”

“I mean, he’s less… *murdery* than before.” Hino gives an indifferent shrug. “Probably helps that he actually *leaves* every now and then, instead of hanging around getting pissy over everything the dickhead does.”

“Pot, kettle,” Izuku says absently, and turns his attention to the Pussycats before Hino gets indignant.

“All right!” Pixiebob’s voice carries easily to each of them. “You’ll be drawing lots to partner up, and then we’ll get started!” She gestures behind her, to where the path forks into the dark forest. “The trail loops around, so you’ll end up back here when you’re done! Take the left path! When you reach the halfway point, you’ll find Ragdoll waiting for you with tags, which you’ll take to prove you didn’t chicken out!”

“Your fellow hero students will be waiting for you along the way,” Mandalay adds, grinning. “They’ll be pulling out all the stops to scare you, and once you’re finished, it’ll be your turn to do the same to them. It’ll be a contest of creativity—”

“To see if you can scare the crap out of each other!” Pixiebob finishes. “Now gather ‘round, find your partners—”

Not Bakugou, Izuku thinks, when he picks out a small slip of paper with the number six on it. With his luck, it’ll be too much to ask to partner with Uraraka or Iida or Todoroki, but just as long as he doesn’t have to do this with Bakugou—

“I have the number six! Who else does?”

Izuku almost sags with relief, and raises the arm that Rei isn’t holding. “Over here, Yaoyorozu!” Seeing him, she smiles and comes to join him.

“This is so exciting!” she says. “I haven’t done a test of courage since elementary school! What about you, Midoriya-kun?”

“Um… same I guess—” Izuku jumps when Bakugou’s voice rings out furiously.

“Somebody fucking switch with me!”

Izuku looks over to find Bakugou scowling near an apathetic Todoroki. He shares a commiserating look with his friend over Bakugou’s shoulder, and raises a halfhearted thumbs-up. Todoroki

quirks an eyebrow at him. Mandalay emphasizes that there is to be NO switching, and everyone lines up. Shouji and Tokoyami are in front, followed by Bakugou and Todoroki, then Aoyama and Jirou. Izuku steps in behind them, and turns around to grin at Uraraka and Tsuyu. Behind them are Ojiro and Hagakure, and Iida and Kouda take up the rear.

“Hopefully they won’t burn the forest down,” Yaoyorozu murmurs as Bakugou’s rage dies down to quiet growling. “What were you saying, Midoriya?”

“Oh, uh, it’s been a while since I did something like this,” Izuku admits. “Grade school, like you said. I think I was nine or ten? Everybody said I was no fun because I wouldn’t react to stuff.”

“That’s roundabout way to boast, don’t you think?” Yaoyorozu remarks.

“What? N-no, I didn’t mean it like that—” Izuku splutters, then sees the little smile on Yaoyorozu’s face and realizes she’s joking with him. “Well. We’ll see. If worst comes to worst, I can scream pretty convincingly. Or jump into your arms, that’ll really sell it.”

“That would be the polite thing,” Yaoyorozu says, straight-faced.

Almost ten minutes later, Rei is bouncing with excitement, and Pixiebob finally signals them to start. With a deep breath, Izuku walks down the left path with Yaoyorozu. Rei lets go of him and makes to run ahead and check for scares, but Izuku catches her before she can. She looks back with a frown, and he fingerspells a quick request.

Don’t give them away .

They may have dressed this up into a quirk-training exercise, but it’s also supposed to be fun. And where’s the fun in a test of courage if he always knows what’s about to happen?

Watch for Tsubasa, nothing else, he tells her.

Thinking about his former classmate still hurts, but he presses the feeling down. There’s nothing he can do about it, not now. All he can do is wait and see All-Might about it, maybe share what he knows. Maybe… maybe he’ll even have to…

Well. That’s for later.

There's enough moonlight to keep track of where the path is, but one of the rules of the game was to leave all flashlights behind. Of course, nothing in that rule covers Yaoyorozu's quirk, so she makes a couple of small LED flashlights and passes one to Izuku.

The first scare comes when a boy materializes out of the darkness—easily, when his skin is jet-black and blends in with the shadows under the trees—and screams at them. The noise makes Izuku jump. Yaoyorozu startles but doesn't drop her flashlight, and lets out a shaky laugh when the boy vanishes back into the dark.

"Good one, Kuroiro," she murmurs.

Their flashlights foil the next attempt at a scare, but Shiozaki trips them up with vines shortly afterward. They move on to the sound of faint laughter from further into the trees.

"We'll get them back," Izuku murmurs with a smile. Yaoyorozu shines her light toward his face, then turns it away again.

"We could probably work something out with your eyes," she muses. "They reflect light pretty noticeably. Have they always done that?"

"Sort of? Maybe?" Izuku shrugs. "I get red eye whenever I have my picture taken, and I can see pretty well in the dark."

"Wow, you're like a cat."

"Haha, yeah—" Movement up ahead makes him freeze, and a figure steps out into the path. "Oh nice try—" He shines his light up ahead, ready to call out Class 1-B for exposing themselves like that, but his voice trails off. The figure looks back at him, eyes white and blank.

It's not Rei. It's not Tensei. It's not Hino, or Narita, or the Izumis, or even Tsubasa. It's not someone Izuku has ever seen before.

"Midoriya?" Yaoyorozu sounds confused.

"Sorry," Izuku says, dropping the beam back to the trail ahead. "Sorry, thought I saw something."

"Chances are you did," Yaoyorozu says. "We don't know all of Class 1-B's quirks."

"Maybe," Izuku murmurs as he watches the figure drift off into the trees. His relief doesn't last long; another figure steps out to take the

first one's place.

And then another.

And another.

Izuku's steps falter. There are dead people here, wandering the woods. Why are there dead people here?

"Midoriya?" Yaoyorozu slows to keep from leaving him behind. "What's the matter? If you hear something, then—Midoriya!"

Izuku stumbles, not because of uneven ground or a trick from the other class, but because Rei cannons into him with a rattling cry. When he catches himself, she's in his face, eyes dripping black as she signs at him.

—run run we have to run we have to go, the boy with wings is here and there are more of them.

Izuku looks past her to the path ahead. Spectral figures drift into view and out again. Voices murmur, weep, cry out and wail. Beside him, Yaoyorozu sees and hears none of this.

Rei drags on his arm, fingers ice cold and digging into his skin. *They're coming. They're coming. We have to go. They're coming.*

"Who?" Izuku whispers.

Murderers.

"Midoriya?" He's stopped walking, and Yaoyorozu has stopped, too. "Midoriya, what is it? You're starting to worry me—"

"Something's wrong," Izuku says. "Something's wrong, I think we should go back."

"Midoriya, come on." Yaoyorozu gives an exasperated sigh. "We're almost to the checkpoint—that's halfway, there's no point in turning back—"

"*Shhh*," Izuku hisses. "This isn't—it's not the test of courage, *something's actually wrong.*"

The exasperation on Yaoyorozu's face fades. "What do you mean?" she asks. "Do you hear something?"

Oh, if only she knew.

"*I want to go home. I want to go home. I want to go—*"

"*They're going to kill them. They'll kill all of them.*"

"*They're kids! Just kids! Isn't there something we can—?*"

"*They're coming.*"

"*Not long now.*"

"*De-ku.*"

Izuku freezes. He turns around.

Tsubasa staggers out of the dark, dragging his broken wings. He still looks like himself, like the boy Izuku would have grown up knowing, if things had been different. But Izuku can see flashes now—of burns and gashes, the wounds that killed him in the end.

"Midoriya!" Yaoyorozu's urgent voice brings his attention back to her, and he realizes her hand is on his shoulder, gripping tight. "Talk to me. What's going on?"

"I-I don't know, I heard something—there's—" It's because he's looking at her that he sees it, drifting in from the forest on the left of the path. At first he thinks it's another ghost, but it can't be. It's formless, low to the ground like mist, only…

That's not mist.

"Yaoyorozu," he hisses, and shines his light on the visible gas drifting into the path. Yaoyorozu steps away with a cry of alarm, pulling him back and away from it.

What follows is almost an explosion. It's not like Kacchan's power, a deafening thunderclap of heat and force. No, this builds from a dull roar until Izuku can smell smoke and burning.

Flames shoot skyward from outside of the trail's loop, from a point in the trees beyond where the mist is coming from. A bright, vivid red pillar of fire lights up the night, and the dead cry out.

Yaoyorozu's grip turns painful. He looks back at her, and finds her staring wide-eyed at the flames.

“That’s a signal,” she says. “Midoriya, come on. We have to find Ragdoll.” She tugs on him, drawing him toward the other side of the path. “Come on—whatever that gas is, we shouldn’t breathe it in—”

“One of them’s coming!” one of the ghost says, and Izuku whips around toward the speaker just as someone comes crashing toward them, from the right side of the trail. He activates Full Cowl, ready for trouble.

“Wait,” Yaoyorozu warns him, and a small, swift shape bursts out onto the path and stumbles toward them, feet clacking oddly in the hard-packed dirt.

She’s a Class B student, and Izuku vaguely recognizes her from the Sports Festival. She’s small but hard to miss, with bright yellow hair and an impressive set of horns.

Yaoyorozu lets go of Izuku to catch her before she can fall. The girl stumbles against her, and Izuku realizes that she has hooves instead of feet. “It’s Tsunotori, isn’t it? Tsunotori Poni? Are you all right?”

“I’mokay,” Tsunotori says, struggling to stand on her own. Her accent is awkward and stilted, like Japanese isn’t her first language. “But—the gas. Setsuna—Setsuna breathed. She’s—she’s, um. The thing. Not dead, or asleep—”

“Unconscious?” Yaoyorozu says.

“Yeah. Don’t breathe it.” Tsunotori has the neck of her shirt pulled up, covering the lower half of her face.

“Here.” Yaoyorozu shifts the hem of her shirt, and pulls a gas mask out of her stomach. “Put this on, it should help—” She pulls out two more and thrusts one at Izuku, who takes it and scrambles to put it on.

His head goes fuzzy, in a familiar way. They’ve all felt this at least once over the past couple of days—Mandalay’s quirk.

Everyone! At least two villains have invaded the area. It’s possible—most likely that there are more in the forest! Those who can, return to the facility immediately! If you find one of these intruders, do not engage them—continue your retreat. Do not take any risks! Get to the safe zones immediately!

The path is full of gas now, knee-high and so thick that it’s nearly opaque. Izuku stares at it and the ghosts and the fire lighting up the

distant trees, weighing the possibilities—*is this a quirk or technology? If it's a quirk then how close is the person using it? Mandalay said two villains but maybe that's because there are two she's facing right now, and she's back by the fork in the path and someone had to be there to start that fire and she probably doesn't know about the gas and—*

"You heard her." Yaoyorozu's voice cuts through his thoughts, right before Izuku's racing mind can make it to something—something very, desperately important. "And if she's still at the fork, then that means doubling back isn't a safe option. Tsunotori, is there an alternate path?"

"Yes." The horselike girl nods vigorously. "Class B safe zone! I know the way. Cut through the trees, bypass start point. Avoid villains."

"Go, then," Yaoyorozu tells her. She's already pulling out more gas masks. "We'll catch up—something tells me they'll need more of these."

Instead of complying, Tsunotori shakes her head. "I'm all right! I'm strong. I can carry my friends. Setsuna needs help."

"Okay. Stay close, you two!"

And Izuku means to, he really does. But he takes one step after her, watching the ghosts in his peripherals, and stops when one of them comes at him screaming.

His heart plummets to the pit of his stomach as Mrs. Izumi thrusts her desperate, terrified face into his.

"He's here," she says, her voice high and frantic. "He's—Kouta's there, he'll—" Her form flickers. Just for an instant, Izuku sees blood on her face. "*Help him,*" she says, and Izuku doesn't have it in him to tell her no.

He almost takes off then and there, but Rei yanks on his arm and smacks him in the mask. When he looks at her, she points to Yaoyorozu and hits his mask again.

"Oh, you genius," he whispers. "Yaoyorozu, wait!" He dashes to her side, catching her arm before she can run into the woods. "Give me another mask. Make it smaller." *Just in case, you never know.*

She stares at him like he's gone crazy. "What?"

“I’ll catch up with you later, just give me a smaller mask. Child-sized.” He meets her eyes, and sees the look of dawning horror in them.

She makes the mask, adds a larger strap so he can hang it over his shoulder and keep his hands free, and thrusts it into his hands. “Be careful,” she says.

“I’ll meet you back at the building,” he replies, then turns on his heel and looks the other way—past the fire, to where he knows the cliffs are. There’s little need to remember the way; Mrs. Izumi is leading him, and something tells him he’ll find many more ghosts along the way.

Full Cowl lights up green, and the forest around him turns to a darkened blur.

Chapter End Notes

> CW: grief, mishandling of grief, implied torture/murder of a child, discussion of past child abuse, canonical attack on school children.

Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

Part 2 of the double update!

Chapter Notes

As always, this story has a TV Tropes page!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tiger plants his hand against Tenya's chest, stopping him from taking off toward the woods. "Mandalay gave you an order, Class President," he says. "Go back to the facility."

"But—"

The hulking hero pushes him back with little effort, and Tenya doesn't need the reminder—that he's still *weak* and *small* and there isn't a damn thing he can do in the pitch dark against a woman wielding a massive club and a reptilian man who looks like Stain's second coming—

(*how dare they, how dare they worship that man, that murderer, how dare they call him an idol when Tensei is dead in the ground, when twenty heroes are dead at the hand of a man who would rather murder children than fight true evil—*)

Tears prick at his eyes as he stares desperately past the villains to the dark woods beyond. His classmates are there, his best and closest friends are there—Midoriya is there, Uraraka is there, Todoroki and Yaoyorozu and Tsuyu and—

"Go!" Tiger roars, and Tenya chokes on a sob and obeys, hating every step.

"Help them," he whispers under his breath—who he's talking to, he has no idea. "Help them, please, bring them all back safe."

(He doesn't hear the voice in his ear, whispering, '*One step ahead of you, little brother.*')

Kouta knows this man. He knows him from before he stopped

watching TV, before he stopped looking at news stories, before he shut his eyes and plugged his ears to everything that has to do with heroes and villains and quirks. There was just enough time, before that point, for Kouta to see this man's face plastered over every news channel.

The right side of his face is the exact image from those pictures. The left…

The left is practically gone. The eye is gone, the skin is gone—just a wide, jagged rip down the side of his face, and an artificial eye in place of the old one.

And he's still smiling.

He should run. Somewhere in his mind, Kouta is trapped, frozen, staring up at the mountain of a man who took his parents away. The world goes blurry at the edges. He steps back. The man is talking to him, but Kouta can't hear him. He's raising his fist, but Kouta can't see him.

"*Mom*," he whispers, and his voice trembles even more than the tears in his eyes. "*Dad*."

He promised he wouldn't be like his parents. He swore he would never, ever be like his parents, that he wouldn't die like they did. And he was right.

His parents didn't have to die alone.

The fist comes down—

I'm sorry I'm sorry I don't hate you I never hated you I want to go home—

Something slams into him. Not a fist, not death—it's a whole body, bigger than him but so much smaller than the man that killed his parents. There are arms around him, clutching him close, and before he can hit the ground he's twisted around and thrust upward so someone else takes the brunt of it. The tears in his eyes fall—he sees the man's ruined face just for an instant, twisted with surprise and rage—and then there's nothing around them but empty air.

Kouta's mouth opens, but he's too shocked to scream. He holds tight to the person carrying him as his stomach drops—and his view is all wrong, all crooked and backwards and turned on its head, but he knows now that this is what it looks like to pitch over the edge of the rocky shelf.

He squeezes his eyes shut, and buries his face in their shoulder to muffle his terrified cries, holding tight to his rescuer as they leap and fall, slide, and leap and fall again until the ledge of his secret base is high above them. He tries to breathe, but he can only gasp—the impact knocks the wind out of him.

“Sorry!”

He knows that voice.

Kouta opens his eyes, and blinks in the glare of green lightning. He knows this quirk. The trees around them turn into a single dark smear until Kouta’s stomach flip-flops and he has to shut his eyes. When he gathers the shreds of his courage back around him, he turns his head and opens his eyes again.

Midoriya is running, and there’s a gas mask hanging around his neck and another slung over his shoulder, and Kouta doesn’t know what that means, he doesn’t know why Midoriya is here, and it feels like that shouldn’t matter but it *does* matter, because why would Midoriya save him? Why would any of these people want to save someone who hates them, it doesn’t make *sense*—

Something hits the ground like a meteor, just a stone’s throw behind them.

Izuku knows he’s fucked. He only hopes Kouta hasn’t figured it out yet.

His phone is destroyed. When he knocked Kouta out of the hulking villain’s way, he hadn’t expected the outward force from that punch hitting the ground. It was enough to keep him from landing properly, and he was barely able to keep from falling on top of Kouta. He has far less now than he did against Stain; no phone, no promise of living backup, not even his proper gear. With Kouta in his arms, his balance is off.

On the other hand, this is no enclosed alleyway. He can run away. He has terrain on his side, one way or another—and if he could get up to that ledge to catch Kouta, then he could damn well get back down it again.

And so now he’s ducking and weaving through the trees while the villain behind him barrels straight through them like a juggernaut. The fire is spreading. He has no idea where the villains are, or how

many of them there are.

“Keep going,” Mr. Izumi urges. “Come on. Not far now.”

Rei shrieks. Izuku braces himself. “From the left!” Mrs. Izumi cries out, and Izuku swerves right. He doesn’t just dodge—he changes course entirely, and stumbles when the villain’s impact shakes the very earth beneath his feet.

“Don’t stop now! You’ve got it!” Izuku doesn’t know that voice. He doesn’t know most of the voices in his ears right now. He isn’t sure how many ghosts the villain has with him.

It’s more than twenty, though.

“Takes some balls, taking on Muscular.”

“He’s coming straight at you from behind! Move, kid!”

Izuku swerves again, this time to the left, and the villain—Muscular? —clips him. That’s still enough to send Izuku flying off his feet. He lands awkwardly, clutching Kouta close to his chest so the boy won’t hit the ground. He struggles to his feet, ready to run—

Boom.

It’s the kind of impact that sends trees toppling to the ground. It’s certainly not the kind of impact that lets Izuku stay standing.

He scrambles up again and whips around, shoulders squared, tense and ready as he places himself between Kouta and the villain.

Muscular crouches to the ground, watching him with a grin that splits his face nearly in half. His fist is pressed to the center of a crater, and his arm bulges—it barely even looks like an arm anymore, bloated and grotesque with woven muscle fibers.

“Damn.” His voice shakes with laughter, and when he stands, Izuku imagines that he’s the sort of man who can block out the sun if he angles himself just right. “*Damn*.”

The fire is close—not close enough to be dangerous yet, but close enough to be on Izuku’s mind. The looped trail, and the Pussycats—where are they? How far? How long has he been running? How far did Muscular drive him off course?

“I gotta say, I do love a good chase,” Muscular says. “It’s been a long

time since I had a decent runner. You're fun, kid. I like that."

He has Rei. He has the Izumis. He has… dead people. Hopefully useful dead people.

"And the boy?" Izuku asks. He's pretty sure his voice doesn't shake too much. "I can't imagine he'd be too fun for you. Why not let him go? You won't get anything out of him."

"W-what—?" Kouta's voice trembles behind him. "What are you—"

"Ohhh, don't *tempt* me." There's a strange vibration beneath Muscular's voice, a thrumming little waveform that's almost a purr. "When something runs, I gotta chase. That's just how it is." He pauses, head tilting. "You, though? You're lucky. It's Midoriya, right? I know your face. Lucky for you, you're not supposed to die tonight." More muscle fibers creep up his arms to his shoulders, weaving together into solid cords. "Nobody ever said I couldn't have a little fun, though." His teeth flash in the dark. "So. *Entertain me.*"

"You can't fight him," Mrs. Izumi tells him. "You can't take him on—whatever you're thinking, you *can't.*"

"Though, I guess if you're that set on the little kid surviving? I'm a reasonable guy." Muscular steps forward, and Izuku can feel the vibrations beneath his feet. Rei moves his side. Her hair is stirring. "Tell me where I can find that Bakugou kid, and maybe I'll let the little one run along home."

They're after Bakugou. Izuku takes a step back, and hears Kouta stumble along behind him.

"You have to run," Mr. Izumi tells him. "Take Kouta—take him and run. You can make it. You're almost there—"

"Take a look around, Water Horse," one of the others says flatly. "You *know* how fast he is. That kid takes two running steps and he's dead."

"Then tell me something useful," Izuku murmurs. Rei is moving, around Muscular to the space behind him.

"What was that?" Muscular asks.

"I don't have anything useful for you," he says, louder this time. "Sorry."

“Huh.” Izuku sees the moment Muscular makes his choice. “That’s a shame.”

Rei appears over Muscular’s shoulder, clawed hand swinging around to swipe at the back of his head. Confusion flashes across the villain’s scarred face. His head whips around, and Izuku launches himself forward and hurls a punch at his jaw.

Muscle fibers twist up along the villain’s neck. Izuku’s punch lands, and he might as well have hit a brick wall with a plastic toy hammer.

Izuku blinks, starts to form a plan to retreat and regroup. Before the first thread of thought can take form, Muscular punches him in the ribs. His feet leave the ground, the world turns end over end, and when it rights itself, Izuku is slammed sideways into the trunk of a tree. He slides to the ground, jaws cracked open, head spinning. He activates his quirk again and hurls himself back into the fight, this time aiming low.

The same thing happens, only this time Muscular flings him around like a ragdoll with his feet. Izuku feels one of his ribs give.

“Too slow!” Muscular’s voice rings out, almost sing-song with glee. It’s a familiar tone. He sounds like a bully in the schoolyard, laughing and jeering as he holds a backpack or a notebook or a lunch pail high over Izuku’s head. Izuku doesn’t even have the chance to get up before Muscular tosses him around again.

“That’s the most pathetic quirk I’ve ever seen,” he jeers. “It does—what? Makes you strong? Makes you quick? What’s the point of that when you can’t be stronger or quicker than *me*?”

He’s bleeding. He can feel it trickling warm and wet down his face, on his arms. He’s on the ground and bleeding, and he can hear Kouta’s voice, high and desperate and pleading. Muscular is talking back—at least for now, his attention is turned aside.

“Get up.” Mrs. Izumi is at his side, pleading with him. “Please. I’m sorry—I’m so sorry, but you’re his only hope.”

“I know,” Izuku whispers back. His arms tremble as he levers himself up again. “I know.” Muscular is right. Full Cowl can’t help him win. Muscular isn’t Stain—he’s stronger than Stain, crazier and cleverer and he doesn’t seem to care about any ideals.

He doesn’t have a choice. He can either go all out, or die. Or let Kouta

die.

What can I sacrifice? he thinks. *What can I do without?*

Not his legs. He needs his legs to get around. His arms, then? One arm, if possible? He could do a lot, with one arm intact.

He readies himself to stand—no time to waste, not when Kouta needs him. He clenches his fists, and hopes Recovery Girl can forgive him for what he's about to do again.

"*Midoriya!*"

Heads turn. Not Muscular's head, or Kouta's. Only the ghosts can hear Tensei's voice when he appears at the scene.

"Tenya's safe!" Tensei calls to him. "But—things are bad. The fire's spreading, and there's a villain fighting Aizawa back at the facility—there are at least seven in all, by my count. There's no one who isn't fighting or running." He eyes Muscular. "Tell me how I can help you."

The fire roars roars in the distance. Somewhere in the woods, Yaoyorozu is waiting to meet him back at the facility. Uraraka—there was enough time for Uraraka and Tsuyu to go into the woods before this started, wasn't there? Todoroki? Bakugou—they're after Bakugou.

He has to help them.

Izuku's heart sinks down, down, down, until it feels as if it's level with the ground.

The answer to his question? Is nothing.

There is nothing he can't do without.

He needs his legs to run and find his friends. He needs his arms to carry Kouta, to carry his friends if they can't walk.

"Inteference," he says. He says it loudly enough to turn Muscular's attention back to him. He doesn't know how he must look, bloodied and battered within an inch of his life.

"What?" Muscular asks.

"You saw what Rei did?" Izuku whispers to Mrs. Izumi, barely moving his lips. "Do that. Stay out of my way, but do that, and pass it on."

“I don’t know if I can,” she tells him. “She—she *touched* him. Didn’t she?”

“Don’t do it for me,” Izuku whispers. “Do it for him. Do it for Kouta. You can still fight for him. I’ll help you.”

“Okay,” she answers. “*Okay*.”

Izuku launches himself not forward, but up.

He couldn’t have managed this on the cliffside. It was too open, with no ceiling overhead and only one solid wall. But here there are trees, with limbs and trunks that he can ricochet off of. He’s not faster or stronger than Muscular by himself, but he can build up his speed, build up the force behind his blows. If Gran Torino could do it, then so can he.

There’s another advantage to this, of course: it pisses him off. And if Muscular is angry with him, then he’ll stop paying attention when Kouta backs away from him.

Branches crack, bark splinters, and Izuku sends dirt flying every time he touches the ground. It’s close—far too close. If Rei and the ghosts weren’t doing absolutely everything they could to keep him distracted, Muscular would probably have smacked him to the ground again.

There has to be a limit. There has to be a weak spot. If he can find it, and build up enough momentum to hit it—

“Quit fucking PLAYING AROUND!” Muscular roars. “Get your ass down here and fight me!”

Izuku rebounds off a branch and flies at him again. He only means to skim over his shoulder, but Muscular is still impossibly fast. The fibers on his shoulder twist, part. And then, to his horror, they rise up and trap his wrist. He yanks at it, but to no avail. When Muscular’s reinforced fist swings around again, he can’t dodge.

Hands grab at his arms and yank him back, His hand is wrenched free, and Muscular’s punch only cracks another rib instead of shattering bone.

He falls back, landing near Kouta. Rei and Tensei are at one arm, the Water Horses at the other. Izuku doesn’t waste his breath on a thank you. Setting his jaw, he ignores his wounds and grabs Kouta again before racing off into the trees.

“He’s too fast,” Kouta sobs. “He’s too—you can’t—”

“I know,” Izuku mutters. “I know. I’m not escaping. Just need room. Need to think.” He looks over his shoulder, mindful of the sounds of Muscular crashing through the trees. The Izumis are here, and Tensei and Rei, and even a handful of the ghosts following the villain. “Something useful,” he murmurs. “His quirk, how does it work?”

“Muscle augmentation,” Mr. Izumi answers, speaking quickly. “He can reinforce his muscles to increase his strength, durability, and speed. Nothing fancy, but he’s incredibly strong and incredibly skilled with it.”

“Limits,” Izuku murmurs. He finds denser brush. The fire is still spreading—soon, most of the escape routes will be burning. “Stay,” he says, and turns back before Kouta can argue with him.

“I’m not sure what his limit is,” Mr. Izumi says. “We didn’t—we didn’t get the *chance*—”

“It’s augmentation!” Mrs. Izumi calls out. A tree falls to Muscular’s relentless charge. “He isn’t creating, or moving, he’s *augmenting*! He can’t augment what isn’t here!”

And that?

Izuku can work with that.

Muscular hits him fist-first. He tumbles back, close to where he hid Kouta. Muscular punches him again, and Izuku vomits.

“Skeletal muscle!”

He isn’t sure who says that. Then his watery vision clears, and one of the ghosts is in his face, calling to him urgently. It’s a woman, just young enough to still be in college.

“Only skeletal muscle!” she repeats. “He can’t manipulate smooth or cardiac muscle, I’m sure of it! They’re both involuntary!”

It takes a few seconds for his brain to translate words to information.

Skeletal muscle. Voluntary muscle. On his arms, his shoulders, and his trunk. Lighter on the legs—he favors punches, and less bulging muscle on his legs makes him quicker, more maneuverable.

Sprawled out on the ground, Izuku can see a clear shot to his target.

He stretches his limits to the very edge, until his own muscles burn, until he feels his bones just barely buckle under the strain. He uses Gran Torino's trick again, rebounds off any surface he can find until he finds the right angle and—

Thud.

Muscular's voice rings out with the sudden impact, pitched with rage and pain. His hand closes on Izuku's elbow. He squeezes, crushes, *twists*

Izuku screams until his throat is raw. Muscular flings him to the ground, and for a few moments all he can do is lie and gasp and retch with pain.

He can't move his left arm. His shoulder is a single screaming mass of agony. Muscular looms over him, stumbling a little, limping a little, slowed by Rei plunging her hands into his chest, but not quite enough —

A torrent of water crashes over his back. He whips around, his single eye alight with rage. Kouta stands behind him, trembling in terror, hands still outstretched from using his quirk.

"FUCK THE ORDERS!" Muscular roars. "YOU'RE DEAD, MIDORIYA! YOU'RE BOTH DEAD!"

"Dislocated shoulder." Tensei's voice is tight as he helps Izuku to his feet. "Midoriya—"

"Hey, so I know he's probably gonna die and that's horrifying," one of the other ghosts mutters. "But that was *really* fucking funny."

"I mean yeah, that kid nailed him right in the—"

At least there's that, Izuku thinks. If he's going to die here, if he's going to utterly fail to save one little boy, then at least he got in one good hit. The Water Horses did too, didn't they? They did one better than him; the proof of it is still stamped across Muscular's face—

Oh.

The plan comes to him half formed, half-baked. But it's still a plan. It's still something he can do that isn't just hurling himself uselessly at a brick wall.

He whispers it to Tensei, who nods. He hears the dead murmuring, passing it along. Someone laughs, darkly satisfied.

The strap that Yaoyorozu gave him, to hang the small gas mask from his shoulder, is long enough to use as a makeshift sling for his injured arm. His shoulder still protests sharply at him when he takes off, but he grits his teeth and forces it to the back of his mind.

This time, when Muscular grabs him out of the air by his good arm, Izuku grabs back. His fingers find purchase in the muscle fiber, and he twists—not the arm but his own body, until he's angled just right to swing his foot around.

Muscular's quirk only lets him augment the muscles that are already there. And there are no muscles in a mechanical prosthetic eye.

It works better than he could have hoped. Izuku sees sparks, hears Muscular scream as his kick forces broken metal into his face, and the painful grip on his good arm loosens. His bad shoulder sends white-hot agony straight to his brain as he grabs Muscular's shirt for purchase to pull free.

"Good shot, now get back!" someone calls to him, but Izuku does not. He keeps his grip on Muscular and tries to heave himself upward—cold, willing hands push him up from behind—and he finds himself clambering up to Muscular's shoulders, holding on for dear life as the villain heaves against him, reaches up to tear him off—

Muscular's head twists around to look at him, contorted with rage. Izuku's lips pull back from his clenched teeth, and he strikes with all the speed he can pour into his good arm.

There are no muscles over an eye socket, either.

Muscular *howls*.

Izuku feels the villain hurtle them both back into a tree, but he clings on grimly, and digs his thumb deeper into Muscular's eye socket. Muscular slams him again and again, the world around him dims, and his stomach turns as he gouges and twists until he feels blood spurt and pour around his hand.

Finally, Muscular catches hold of his shirt, rips him off, and flings him away, and Izuku can only sob wretchedly when he lands and jars his dislocated shoulder.

Rage and abuse pour from Muscular's mouth, the filthiest curses Izuku has ever heard, but the damage is done. The artificial eye is shattered, and the remaining real one is gone, replaced with a bloody socket. The villain's head swings this way and that as he lashes out blindly with both arms.

Izuku half runs, half crawls to Kouta's side. He unclips the gas mask from the strap and thrusts it clumsily into the boy's face, whispering *put it on, put it on,* frantically until Kouta fumbles it onto his head. He doesn't know how, and Izuku's hands are shaking, but Mrs. Izumi moves to help secure the mask onto her son's face.

"On my back," Izuku grits out. "Now." Too terrified to argue, Kouta obeys. His arms lock around Izuku's neck, and Izuku heaves him up, puts his own mask back on, and follows Mr. Izumi's desperate cry.

"This way! This way!"

Muscular whips around, hearing the sound of his clumsy steps, and hurtles after them. He's frightfully accurate; Izuku keeps running, dodging out of the way as the ghosts call warnings to him. The villain can't stop him from dodging, not without eyes; all he can do is hurl himself at every snap of a twig, every rustle in the underbrush, until Izuku leads him away from the fire and back to the looping path.

The trail is empty of people when Izuku bursts out of the trees, but the gas is waist-deep and as thick as pea soup fog.

"What's—" Kouta whimpers, but Izuku hushes him.

"You can't run forever!" Muscular snarls. "Not with that arm! Not with that kid! Give up, you little bastard!"

Izuku breathes as quietly as he can, as lightly as he can even with the gas mask protecting him. Muscular is gasping, heaving with rage, spitting when the blood from his ruined eye trickles into his mouth.

And then he stumbles.

"What—" he growls. "No… *Mustard*—you little *shit*—"

He crashes to the ground. His body all but disappears in the swirling mist. In a matter of moments, all Izuku can hear is Kouta's hollow breathing, and the distant roar of flames.

"Holy *shit*," one of the ghost mutters. Rei takes the opportunity to kick

the downed villain.

“Okay,” Izuku whispers. “Okay. Cool, cool, cool, let’s go.”

“We’ll keep an eye out for villains,” Tensei tells him.

“And lead you away from the fires,” Mrs. Izumi adds.

Mr. Izumi offers a weak smile. “You’re taking the easy way back, got it?”

“We’re sticking with him,” one of Muscular’s ghosts says. “Either he burns to death, or I get to see him get hauled away by the cops. Either way, I’m not missing it.” The dead gather around their murderer, grim and patient and satisfied.

Izuku nods. He gives Muscular a wide berth, then carries Kouta away from the gas. It’s only when the villain and the gas are far behind them that Izuku lets him down, takes off his mask and helps Kouta out of his. It’s only when it’s off his face that Kouta quietly breaks down in tears.

“’S okay,” Izuku says, and makes a note to thank Momo properly for that strap, because the damn thing is still supporting his left arm. Awkwardly he hooks his right arm around Kouta and pulls him into a hug. “’S okay. We’re okay.” Kouta sobs wretchedly into his chest. “You’re okay. You did good. You hear? You did so good.”

“*He was gonna kill you.*” Kouta’s voice is muffled into his shirt. “*He was gonna kill you, why’d you do that?*”

“Someone had to,” Izuku says. “No one else knew where you were. So… me.”

“But—but I… I just…” Kouta pulls back, scrubbing tears from his face.

“You think I’m going to let someone kill you just because you’re sad and angry and you swore at me?” Izuku asks. “Forget heroes and villains, that’d just make me an asshole.”

Kouta chokes.

“I’d like to be a hero,” Izuku says. “But I can start with just not being an asshole.”

The noise Kouta makes is somewhere between a sob and a laugh.

“And on the practical side of things…” Izuku pauses, and glances toward the fire glow leaking through the thick trees. “Those fires are spreading. And as far as I know, the only one here with a quirk like yours is… well, you. We’re gonna need your help pretty soon, I think.”

Kouta’s face does a funny little twitch and twist that tells Izuku he’s trying not to cry again. “…Okay,” he whispers.

“Alright then. Hop up, we’ll get there faster if I carry you. Watch my shoulder.”

To his relief, Kouta does as he asks. “It’s shaped funny,” he says.

“I am in so much pain right now.”

Kouta’s getting closer to laughter with each new shaky coughing sound he makes. “I-I didn’t mean to laugh.”

“Go ahead and laugh,” Izuku tells him as he sets off after the ghosts. “It feels better than crying, doesn’t it?”

The boy is quiet for a while, before another noise reaches him—it’s almost laughter. Nearly there. “You hit him in the *balls*.”

“Did you like that? I picked it up from you.”

Kouta sobs out another laugh, and Izuku follows the ghosts out of the burning woods.

Momo is beginning to get hungry. Most of her dinner has gone into providing gas masks to everyone she meets. She doesn’t know where Kendou is, but Awase-kun has been leading students to Class B’s safe zone for aid. Tsunotori keeps showing up, carrying a different classmate each time; Momo’s had to replace her gas mask once already.

She finds Jirou unconscious, with Aoyama staggering drunkenly under her weight until she shoves a mask at his face. Her classmate is wide-eyed with terror, all bravado forgotten; Momo practically has to shout and shake him to keep his attention from flying away in a panic.

“Get Jirou back to the facility.” she says, and points in the direction Awase has been leading people. “You’ll find Class B students heading that way. Hurry!”

He nods vigorously, too frazzled to speak, then scoops Jirou up and

stumbles off with her. Momo watches them go, fighting the physical ache in her chest. She wants to go with them, but she can't yet, not when there are still students unaccounted for.

She runs into Awase soon after, and this time he's alone. "Any more?" he asks. "I just left some of the others. They're… they're all right."

"I can't find anyone else," she says. She purses her lips. "I think we should go."

Awase shakes his head. "But what if—"

"The longer we stay out here, the longer we risk becoming casualties ourselves," Momo tells him. "We've done what we can. We should regroup with the others."

He looks like he'd like to argue, but he sighs and nods reluctantly. "Alright. Come on, before something else—"

Somewhere to their right, a tree splits, groans, and tips over. The two of them freeze, staring at each other in faint alarm.

And then, something else groans.

Momo draws in a quiet, shuddering breath as dread solidifies in her heart, as heavy and solid as lead. She hopes against hope that isn't what she thinks it is, but luck is not on their side tonight.

She never got close to the one at the USJ. She never got the chance. From what Todoroki and Iida and Tsuyu and some of the others have told her? That's a good thing.

Slowly, they turn to look as another tree tips, and the Noumu steps out from behind it with another hoarse, creaking groan.

It took nothing less than All-Might himself to take down the one at the USJ.

"Run," Momo whispers, and this time Awase doesn't argue with her.

Aizawa Shouta races through the woods, seething.

The villain Dabi is not unfamiliar to him. Most underground heroes have seen his face in pictures, at least. It's hard to mistake it; with scars like that, he couldn't be anyone else.

Except, of course, that the one that Shouta just fought turned out to be a clone, doubtless the result of another villain's quirk.

But Shouta is willing to bet that the real one is here all the same. Dabi is powerful, ruthless, and a cold-blooded killer, and Shouta would rather face ten of the Noumu than see the bastard so much as touch one of his students.

But he's lost precious time. He needs to regroup with the Pussycats, find out where the students are, find out how many villains they're even dealing with—

"Aizawa-sensei!"

Shouta halts, and Midoriya Izuku comes hurtling out of the trees. At the sight of him, Shouta bites back a hiss. He looks like he's been hit by a train—his face may as well have been beaten with a rock, one of his eyes is swelling shut, and his clothes are torn and bloodied. His left arm is hanging in a canvas strap, and his shoulder is noticeably crooked.

Izumi Kouta clings to his back, tearstained but unhurt.

"Midoriya, what—"

His student skids to a halt in front of him, and he somehow looks even worse up close. "Hi. Did you win?"

"Did I—"

"Never mind." Midoriya crouches low and lets Kouta slide to the ground. "Sensei, I need a favor—can you take him back? I have to get to Mandalay, there's something I have to tell her, Kouta's got a water quirk, make sure nothing happens to him—" He starts to run off again, but Shouta snaps one end of his capture weapon around the arm that isn't injured.

"Midoriya, stop. Your shoulder's dislocated."

"Could be worse—"

"*Midoriya.*"

His student turns to him, his battered face tense with desperation. "Sensei, I have to *go*. They're after Bakugou, maybe more of us, and I have to tell Mandalay so she can tell everyone else."

Shouta's jaw tightens. "Take the strap off," he says.

"I kind of need it or my arm flops around and it hurts like—"

"*Now, Midoriya*."

At his tone, Midoriya starts gingerly shrugging out of the makeshift sling. Shouta takes hold of the affected arm.

"Relax your shoulder," he says. Midoriya nods and turns his head away.

He works as quickly as he dares. He's certainly done this to himself often enough—relocating a limb is uncomfortable, but nothing like the violent wrenching he always sees in fiction. Carefully he bends Midoriya's arm at the elbow, then rotates the limb outward, pushing gently, further and further until the bone snaps back into place with an audible pop. Midoriya winces, then takes his arm back with a look of relief on his face.

"You'll have torn tissue in that shoulder," Shouta tells him. "At least *try* to be careful with it."

"Yes, Sensei," he says meekly. "Can I go now?"

And Shouta hates this—*hates this*—because he knows now that the students themselves are the targets, not their teachers this time, and he knows that that makes the facility a target that Sekijurou can't defend single-handed. And he knows that while he's agile and skilled, Midoriya's quirk makes him faster at a flat-out run.

"When you get to Mandalay," he grits out. "Tell her this— 'Members of Class A and B, I hereby authorize you for combat.'"

Midoriya's eyes widen.

"There's a choice now between breaking the law and letting these villains kill you," Shouta tells him. "It's not a choice you should have to make, so I'm making it for you."

Midoriya nods. "I'll see you when everyone's safe!" he calls back, then turns and vanishes in a burst of green lightning.

Shouta picks up Mandalay's nephew. The boy is quiet now, even quieter than he's ever been before, for all that he's crying.

"Don't worry," he says gruffly. "I'm gonna hold him to that."

Izuku finds the Pussycats in the middle of a battleground. He can only see three of them here—there's Mandalay and Tiger, protecting an injured Pixiebob while they take on one villain each. Where's Ragdoll?

She was at the checkpoint when this started, he remembers. *She's probably helping the other kids escape.*

He delivers his message, and leaves them to it. He's not about to get in the middle of that—no way, no how. They're pros, and he has to trust that they know what they're doing. One of the villains tries to give chase as he flees, but not for long. Izuku leaves the fight behind, and focuses on the ghosts that now fill the forest.

Let it in, Ragdoll had said. Break up all the noisy things into smaller bite-sized things.

Or, Izuku thinks. *Delegate.*

"Rei," he says. "Find Bakugou." She scowls at him. "Just do it, Rei, you're the fastest. No offense, Tensei."

"None taken," Iida's brother assures him. "I can help in ways she can't, anyway. Someone's bound to have seen explosions. I'll ask around."

"I will, too." Izuku turns, surprised to see the Mrs. Izumi still with him.

"Kouta's safe, thanks to you," she tells him. "My husband's with him. I'll help you in any way I can."

"Thank you," he says.

The other dead are surprisingly chatty, once they figure out Izuku can hear them. They're chatty and full of good information—all Izuku has to do is ask, *who are you here with? Who else is here?*

He knows about Muscular already—none of his ghosts are here. But there are ghosts: broken, bleeding people who tell him about Moonfish. Skittish teenagers, pale and haunted, who tell him about Toga Himiko.

Magne and Spinner are the ones he left fighting the Pussycats. Mustard is the one who made the gas. There are two more, Compress and Twice, that no one seems to know much about. Maybe that means

they haven't killed anyone. Maybe that means they're new.

Rei comes back to him shrieking, and when Izuku turns to meet her, his heart lurches. She's pulling Hino along with her, and Izuku has never seen him look so agitated.

"There you are! I've been looking all over these damn woods for you!" Hino pulls his arm out of Rei's grip and waves for him to follow. "You're looking for Bakugou, aren't you? He's still with Shouto. They're fighting—god, I don't even know. Some maniac in a straitjacket with nightmare teeth."

"Moonfish," one of the bloody ghosts murmurs. "He's crazy—they broke him out of prison to get him to join up."

"Lead the way," Izuku says, and for once, Hino doesn't have a snide remark to offer.

He hears the explosions before he sees anything. Shortly after, he hears the familiar glacial creak and groan of Todoroki's quirk, and speeds up his pace.

At first glance, it looks like their opponent is on stilts. The villain is level with the treetops, propped up on long, branching white sticks that lead from the trees and the ice-covered ground up to…

"See?" Hino waves toward it wildly. "You see? Those are his goddamn *teeth*!"

"*Yikes*," Tensei mutters.

"Ice incoming!" Mrs. Izumi yells. "Two o'clock—*move*, Midoriya!"

Instead of moving away, Izuku hurtles toward the oncoming barrage and leaps upward. He lands nearly on top of the growing wedge of ice, and he jumps again, keeping his feet moving so as not to get trapped. Moonfish's teeth grow and shift with stomach-churning speed, lashing downward at what he can only assume are his friends.

Well, one friend and Bakugou.

Todoroki's ice is jagged enough for Izuku to find purchase as he rushes in, leaps, and swings his quirk-charged leg around in a wild sweeping kick.

His strike takes out Moonfish's next attack as well as half of the

enamel stilts holding the villain up. Moonfish howls, mouth wide open and half-full of broken teeth.

They'll reform, Izuku thinks as he lands and slips on an iceberg. "Todoroki, hit him again! Hurry!"

He thrusts himself backward, just as his friend sends up a towering spike of ice. Frost spreads along the teeth that are still intact, until it reaches the broken ends of the rest. Moonfish's howl becomes a pained shriek.

Slipping and tumbling, Izuku makes his way down to firm ground again, and almost falls on top of Todoroki.

"Had to hurt," he gasps out, winded. "Ice on broken teeth? That's the worst."

"It won't keep him back for long," Todoroki says grimly. He's got an unconscious student on his back, a boy from Class B that Izuku doesn't recognize.

Sure enough, Moonfish's teeth grow again, streaking toward them like thin white spears. Todoroki dodges back and drags Izuku with him, not a moment too soon. One of the teeth branches into two spears, and the second tears a shallow gash into Izuku's arm.

"I hate this!" Izuku chokes out, almost drowned out by a nearby explosion. "I hate this quirk! I love quirks but I hate this quirk!"

"Yeah," Todoroki mutters, then raises his voice. "Bakugou! Watch it with those explosions or you'll set the forest on fire!"

Bakugou falls in close to them, snarling back at him."Just cover it with ice then, dumbass!"

"That'll limit our visibility!" Todoroki retorts. Moonfish attacks again, and Todoroki barely manages to shield them all. With his hands full, he can only use his feet to manipulate his quirk.

"Todoroki, give him here," Izuku says.

"What?"

"I was only able to get close because he didn't know I was there," Izuku says. "I won't get a chance like that again, and I'm only good in close quarters. I'll carry him, that'll free up your hands—will that help

your precision?"

"Yeah. Thanks." While they're still shielded, Todoroki fumbles the unconscious student onto Izuku's back. He's heavier than Kouta was, and Izuku has to hold him up himself, but with Full Cowl up, he barely notices the weight.

Teeth punch through the ice, and Bakugou meets them with with an explosion. He yells as the teeth shatter, and Izuku sees why—one of them managed to score into his palm, and the blast sent enamel shards flying.

"Any suggestions?" he asks. "I'm open."

"I'm busy, Deku," Bakugou snaps, with somewhat less bite than usual. But Izuku wasn't talking to him.

"With no backup, no gear, and not enough training, there's not much you can do besides retreat," Tensei says, his voice tight.

"Is there anyway we can lead him back to the gas?" he asks.

"No good." Todoroki shakes his head. "We can't get him down far enough for it to take effect."

Izuku eyes the ghosts—Rei and Tensei, Mrs. Izumi, Hino, all the ghosts following Moonfish. It's getting crowded around here.

I can't make him afraid, Rei tells him, frustrated. *He's like a black hole. Nothing touches him.*

"Um, excuse me?" one of the ghosts calls out, waving from several rows back. "Someone's coming. If that changes anything."

"What?" Izuku says.

"I said we can't get him down far enough for the gas to knock him out," Todoroki repeats, while the ghost points back toward the thicker woodlands.

"Someone's coming," he says again. "Running, actually. And he's being chased."

"Oh," Izuku says faintly. "That's not good."

Todoroki shields them from another attack while Bakugou roars with frustration, then glances at Izuku again. "What's not good?"

“Uh.” Izuku dithers for a moment. “I think we’re about to find out?”

“What’s chasing him?” Tensei calls to the speaker. The question passes from ghost to ghost in a low murmur.

“Something big?” is the hesitant reply.

“I don’t think it came with us.”

“It’s big and dark and…”

“It’s a bird? Someone said it’s a bird. Who said that?”

A big, dark bird. “Tokoyami?” Izuku blurts out.

“Fuck, where?” Bakugou whips around.

“Do you hear something?” Todoroki asks.

And Izuku does. It’s like wind in the distance. Pounding, howling wind, the kind that makes tree trunks bend and break.

“Tokoyami’s quirk,” he says faintly. “It’s weak to light, remember?” He swallows hard, as the howling gets louder. “And that means the reverse is true.”

“*Todoroki!*” It’s not Tokoyami’s voice that hails them. Through the darkness, Izuku sees a taller, hulking figure, running at them with six webbed arms swinging. And behind him—

“Shouji!” Todoroki calls out. “And… Tokoyami?”

“*Todoroki, Bakugou!*” Izuku has never heard Shouji shout before, but he does so now. “*If you can, make light! Hurry!*”

“We should probably get out of the way,” Izuku remarks.

Several things happen at once.

Shouji catches up to them, wild-eyed and frantic. High above, Moonfish shrieks with rage, shifting his teeth toward the oncoming wall of pitch-darkness. Todoroki seizes Izuku’s shirt in one hand, Bakugou’s in the other, and drags them out of the way. Tokoyami and Dark Shadow come roaring in, utterly unstoppable.

Izuku doesn’t quite see the clash, too disoriented from how abruptly things shifted. All he knows is the sound of trees falling and Dark

Shadow roaring and Moonfish screaming, before the forest lights up with Todoroki's flames and Bakugou's explosions. It's over almost as abruptly as it began.

Moonfish is on the ground, silent and motionless. Tokoyami looks wrecked, leaning against Shouji as if he'll fall over if he doesn't.

"I'm sorry," he keeps repeating. "I'm sorry. I couldn't—I didn't mean to—"

"That villain attacked us," Shouji explains, while Tokoyami catches his breath. "It went… badly." He holds up one of his arms, showing them the bloodied stump on the end. "Don't worry, he didn't cut off anything that won't grow back. But when it happened…"

"Dark Shadow is strongest in the absence of light," Tokoyami says quietly. "But also at it's most volatile. I… I gave in to the darkness, and the rage. I apologize. I put you all in danger."

"You also kind of saved our lives," Izuku pipes up. Shouji gives him a flat look, and he shrugs. "Well he did." He glances around at them. "Everyone all right?"

"Odd, coming from you," Todoroki says dryly. "As usual, you're worse off then the rest of us put together. What even happened to you?"

"It's not that bad," Izuku assures him. "You should see the other guy." Todoroki raises an eyebrow, unconvinced. "…It's just a couple of cracked ribs. And extensive bruising. And a dislocated shoulder—but Aizawa-sensei fixed that!"

"And your hand?" Shouji asks.

"Huh?"

His classmate points. "Your right hand's even bloodier than the rest of you. Did you injure it?"

Izuku glances down. "Uh. No. That's… that's not mine." He shakes his head. "I'll tell you all about it when this is over, but we're not out of the woods yet. You all heard Mandalay's message, right?"

"Yes," Todoroki answers. Bakugou scowls.

"Message?" Tokoyami steps away from Shouji to stand on his own. "I was… preoccupied. What did she say?"

“We’ve been authorized for combat,” Todoroki tells him. “And the villains are here to capture Bakugou.”

“We’ll be safest back at the facility, where Blood King and Aizawa-sensei are,” Shouji says.

“Right.” Tokoyami nods. “Our mission from here should be to escort Bakugou, then?”

“Hey—” Bakugou snaps.

“We can’t go back to the clearing where we started,” Izuku says. “The Pussycats are still fighting villains there, so we’ll get spotted for sure. It’d be better to cut through the woods, take the straightest path.”

“We have no way of knowing how many villains there are along the way,” Todoroki points out. “Going through the woods puts us at risk of ambush.”

“I don’t—” Bakugou starts.

“I can detect enemies,” Shouji says.

“I’m no slouch myself,” Izuku adds, eyeing Tensei and Rei. The latter flashes him a thumbs-up. “Add to that the fact that we still have Tokoyami, and a way to control his quirk if we have to, I think we’re good.”

“On that note, I can carry Tsubaraba,” Shouji offers.

Izuku blinks. “Who?”

“…The Class B student on your back.”

“Oh,” Izuku says sheepishly. “He’s, um, not that heavy actually.”

“But the weight distribution makes him awkward to carry,” Shouji replies. “I’m larger—he won’t hamper me as much.”

And… okay, yeah, that’s reasonable. Carefully, Izuku passes Tsubaraba over.

“Are any of you fuckers going to listen to what I have to say?” Bakugou bursts out.

“No,” says Todoroki.

“Not particularly,” says Tokoyami.

With Bakugou in the middle of them, they set off swiftly through the woods.

Even with the closest ghosts watching out for him, Izuku keeps an eye on the spirits beyond that. He can watch them for reactions, for sudden movements, anything to indicate that something or someone is coming.

The gas has mostly dissipated by now—hopefully that means that Mustard is out of the fight. The fires still burn, spreading steadily from the original point. The walk is silent, and the tightness of dread continues to coil and twist in Izuku’s chest.

They’ve almost crossed to the left path when Rei shrieks a warning from behind.

Izuku doesn’t think. He turns, sees an unfamiliar villain drop in behind them. He yells on instinct—not words, just an inarticulate shout of alarm—as the masked man reaches toward Bakugou and Tokoyami without a sound.

He sees Bakugou spin around, one palm already detonating as it swings around blindly. Shouji grabs him by the back of the shirt and yanks him out of the villain’s reach.

“Run!” Izuku yells.

“I can take him—” Bakugou starts to say.

“*Run!*” Izuku repeats, and the five of them burst out of the trees and onto the path.

Izuku nearly crashes straight into Tsuyu. “Asui, run!” he urges. “There’s a villain… behind us…”

His voice trails off as he accidentally locks eyes with Toga Himiko. Uraraka stares at him, wide-eyed with shock.

“Oh,” he says. “Balls.”

Toga’s face lights up with glee, and she looks past him to her fellow villain. “You found him, Mr. Compress!” she squeals, her voice pitched with eerie joy. “Ohhhh look at him, he’s even cuter than he is in the picture!”

That's easily the most horrifying thing anyone has ever said about him.

Voices call to him, high and desperate and nearly deafening. Izuku tries to turn around—he really tries his best. The last thing he sees is Tsuyu's face before the world around him goes pitch-black and very, very small.

The Noumu is about to kill them when, without warning, it halts. Its many arms vanish, and it turns away from Momo and Awase as if abruptly losing interest. The two of them watch, barely breathing, as the hulking thing slowly shambles away through the ruined woods.

"What's going on?" Awase's voice trembles. "What—why did it—"

Momo struggles to stand, but in the end she has to settle for kneeling. "Those things are mindless," she says. "They only take orders—they don't think for themselves. If it's stopped, then that means someone told it to."

"It's retreating," Awase says grimly.

"Then the villains are, too," Momo says. She's lightheaded from using too much of her quirk, but still the beginnings of one last plan are weaving together in her mind. "Either they lost, or…" She doesn't finish that thought. Instead, she reaches into the palm of her hand and creates one last object. "Awase-kun. Your quirk—it lets you weld things together, right?"

"Y-yeah."

"Good." Momo presses the object into his hand. "I need you to do something for me."

One moment Midoriya is there, and the next he's gone. Shouto blinks, and when he opens his eyes, the masked villain is springing back, clutching two tiny marbles in his hand.

"Objective complete," he says. "Hurry back, Ms. Toga." And then he's gone.

"Nice meeting you, Uraraka, Tsutsu!" the villain girl chirps. "Gotta go! See you all soon!" Shouto lunges after her, but Uraraka grabs him and pulls him back.

“Leave her!” she yells. “He’s getting away with Deku and Bakugou!”

His teeth grind until he feels the tension aching in his skull. “Which way?” he spits out.

“Over the trees,” Shouji answers, pointing. “He’s fast—and bypassing the fires, as well. We’ll never catch him.”

“Yes we will!” Shouto snaps, and takes a step to pursue.

“On foot,” Shouji amends. “We’ll never catch him on foot.”

“We won’t catch him by standing around here, either, so hurry—”

“Wait!” Uraraka’s hand closes on his shoulder again. “Wait! Waitwaitwait. Just—what would Deku do? He’d come up with a plan, right?”

“He isn’t here right now, Uraraka,” Shouto grits out.

“You can go over the trees, too!” she snaps back, matching his tone volume for volume. “My quirk, remember? I can make you all float. Can you and Tokoyami use your quirks to move forward?”

“Possibly,” Tokoyami answers. “I’m not sure I quite trust Dark Shadow at the moment.”

“That’s okay.” Asui is lisping a little. There’s blood around her mouth, and when she sticks out her tongue, Shouto can see the cut on it. “That’s okay. I can throw you. Shouji, can you use your arms to glide?”

“I think so—here, someone else take him then.” Shouji lowers Tsubaraba into Uraraka’s hands. They move quickly, tense with quiet desperation. Shouto latches on to one of Shouji’s arms, Tokoyami to another. Uraraka dispels the gravity on them, and Asui’s tongue wraps tightly around them. There’s no time for well-wishes. Asui lifts them up, whirls them like a discus thrower, and lets them fly.

Wind rushes past them, and the trees below pass in a single dark blur. Shouto narrows his eyes against the rush of air, and sees the shape of the villain creep closer and closer as their speed and lightened weight closes the distance between them.

“Look for the marbles!” he yells, pitching his voice above the wind in their ears. “That villain—she called him Compress! That must be his

quirk!”

“I know!” Shouji answers. “They’re in his coat pocket—I saw him slip them in!”

“Brace yourselves!” Tokoyami calls out, and the three of them cannon into the villain just as he leaps back down to the forest floor. The man skids to a halt flat on his face. A moment later Shouto feels gravity return, crushing him into the dirt beneath their combined weight.

Satisfaction vanishes when he looks up and finds them surrounded by what he can only assume are the rest of the invading villains. Two of them look battered and injured, but most still look fresh. They even have a Noumu, towering but docile as it awaits orders. The girl from before is there, eyes lighting up at the sight of them. She springs forward with a knife in her hand, eyes burning with feverish delight.

“Hi again!” she chirps. “You’re back!” That’s all she has time to say before Dark Shadow slams into her with a roar, knocking her back.

“Compress,” a cold voice speaks up. “Heads up.” The temperature in the air skyrockets.

“Move!” Shouto yells, and throws himself out of the way of the oncoming firestorm. It’s the same color as the signal fire that started this, a deep and violent red.

“It’s fine!” he hears Shouji call. He looks over and finds his classmate clutching two marbles. “I’ve got them! Just go!”

The words are barely out of his mouth when the marbles burst, and a pile of branches appears in their place and clatter to the ground.

“Clever of you.” Compress is on his feet. Behind him, a pitch-black warp gate opens, and one by one the villains vanish through it. “I was afraid that might happen. So I kept a few decoys.” He smiles, jaw opening, and shows off the marbles balanced on his tongue. “Farewell. Don’t worry—they’ll be well taken care of.” He steps back, and Shouto braces himself to hurl himself at him for one last desperate attempt.

(He can’t see, of course. None of them can—the only one of them who would is trapped in one of those marbles. He can’t see the little girl who followed them, the angry little girl with a pale face and dark, dark eyes, who moves faster than he could ever hope to.

He doesn’t see her swinging her hand with with all the helpless anger

of a murdered child, striking the man across the face for stealing her little brother.)

The marbles fly from the villain's mouth. Shouto lunges toward one, Tokoyami toward the other.

He feels cold—from his prickling skin to the marrow of his bones, as if someone in the distant future dances on his grave. He sees Compress falter and choke, as if suffocated in perfectly good air. His quirk wavers, and the marbles burst.

Bakugou appears with a gasp, only a few feet from Dark Shadow's reaching claws.

Midoriya comes out screaming.

The sound drills into his head, but Shouto reaches toward him—he's close, he's nearly there—

The heat hits him again, and the villain's flames nearly obliterate Dark Shadow before it can reach Bakugou. Bakugou vanishes again, into another of Compress's marbles, and the villain flees through the portal before anyone can stop him. Shouto's fingertips nearly brush Midoriya's hand when the last villain catches his friend's shoulder and drags him back into the still-open gate.

Cold blue eyes meet his, and the villain's disfigured face crawls into a smile. "Too slow," he says. "Such a shame, Todoroki Shouto."

One last burst of speed, and Shouto's hand closes around Midoriya's just as the scarred villain vanishes. More hands appear out of the portal, grabbing Midoriya's shoulders, his arms, even a handful of his hair, and yank him into the black. Midoriya vanishes, and the gate swallows Shouto's arm up to the elbow.

He clings on grimly, with no leverage, no weight, nothing to keep them from dragging him through, but so be it. Whatever's on the other side, he isn't letting go.

Another hand closes around his arm, hard and cruel and mercilessly tight. It squeezes, pulls, *twists*—

Pain shoots through his wrist, his hand goes numb, and he's thrust back out of the shrinking gate with enough force to throw him to the ground.

The portal closes.

And all is silent.

Chapter End Notes

CW: attempted murder of children by adults, chemical attacks, eye trauma/blinding, serious injury, arm dislocation, claustrophobia, kidnapping.

FIRST OF ALL

Congratulations to everyone who saw that coming! They're were quite a few of you.

AND SECOND OF ALL

NO

THE ANSWER IS NO

I'M NOT SORRY.

ARE YOU KIDDING I'VE BEEN WAITING TO GET TO THIS BIT FOR ABSOLUTE AGES.

Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

Art links now available!

morningisnotalright

cosmic-pindrops

cricketmilk 2

coffee-and-ramen

spooky-skelepuns

tamlins-stories-and-poems 2

rootbeerdoodles

sprytfrysker

animushope

alynnis

heidi3399

actually-deku

captain-sailamander

jestarcana

ajoyc55

cartoon-caity

the-doodleer

biteitwhenitssoft

nohaijiachi (fantastic comic!) and 2 (cute!)

clarenecessities

febboep-hs

kiiiucat

cittsah your-yvonna

geekystranger101

sophisticated-url-here

As always, this story has a TV Tropes page!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eijirou is doing his very best not to freak out.

He's seen a bit more action than most of the remedial kids; one of the villains showed up at the facility at the tail end of the attack, and Blood King's the only reason he didn't get fried. But one little spot of excitement doesn't change the fact that he's been here the whole time, cooped up safe inside while all his friends have been risking their lives against another invasion. What was the point of getting authorized for combat if nobody was going to let him *fight*?

He hasn't heard anything from Bakugou, not since the angry texts from earlier, complaining about getting stuck with Todoroki in the test of courage. It feels so long ago now, and Eijirou can't reach him. He can't reach most of them, and because of that he's stuck waiting around for everyone to trickle in from the woods.

It's been slow. All of Class B has made it back, one way or another, and just a handful of his own class are still missing. Uraraka and Tsuyu were the last to get in—Eijirou saw them run straight to Aizawa-sensei, looking frantic, and they've been talking in hushed tones for almost a minute. In the meantime, Shouji's still gone. Tokoyami's still gone. Bakugou and Todoroki are still gone. Midoriya's still gone—and Yaoyorozu's been a pacing wreck, because apparently they were paired up for the test of courage, too.

Eijirou grinds his teeth. He wishes he could be surprised that Midoriya ran off again, but it makes perfect sense.

For a moment it looks like Aizawa-sensei's about to run out when Eijirou spots them. Shouji and Tokoyami arrive, looking drained—Shouji makes a beeline for Aizawa-sensei, and quickly grows a mouth to say something to him. Red and white hair catches Eijirou's eye, and

he elbows his way through to Todoroki as gently as possible.

“Todoroki! Hey, Todoroki!” This is a good sign. Todoroki was Bakugou’s partner, and he’s one of Midoriya’s best friends. He’ll probably know where they are. “Dude, where’ve you been? You look wrecked.”

It’s true. Outwardly he seems as blank as ever, but it’s paper-thin. Todoroki looks *exhausted*, and it’s not a comforting look on the strongest kid in class.

He doesn’t answer, and Tokoyami steps in. “We…” He shoots a glance back toward Shouji and Aizawa-sensei. “There was… there was a villain. His quirk was strange. They called him ‘Compress’, and his ability allowed him to create these orbs.” He holds his thumb and forefinger apart by about a centimeter. “Maybe so big. And—” His voice catches. “They were not just orbs, but minuscule prisons. And Midoriya and Bakugou…”

Eijirou’s heart plummets to his feet. “Did—don’t tell me—did Midoriya get stuck in one of those?” He has a handful of Tokoyami’s jacket before he can stop himself. His mind punts him back in time, back to the mall, back to Midoriya’s hollow eyes and *I just don’t like being somewhere that’s really small, when I can’t go anywhere.* “That’s bad! That’s *really* bad, he can’t—” Midoriya probably won’t thank him for telling someone about his severe claustrophobia, but… “He doesn’t —he *hates* small spaces, he told me, so—Where is he? Is he okay?”

The look in Todoroki’s eyes as he asks that is something that will probably follow Eijirou to the grave.

Neither of them answer him. They don’t get the chance, because it’s hard to talk and be heard over the high-pitched trilling wail that cuts through the room.

All conversation halts.

There’s some shuffling. People part, people move out of the way, and Mika slowly weaves her way through the forest of legs around her, filling the silence with insistent meowing. She moves from person to person, never stopping long, searching each and every corner of the area, until she finally sits down, tilts her head back, and continues to cry.

Eijirou looks up at the sea of faces. The B-Class kids mostly just look confused, but that’s only because they don’t know Mika. They can’t

know what this means.

There's open horror on Yaoyorozu's face as she watches Mika wail. Uraraka's crying. Tokoyami won't look at him anymore. Aizawa-sensei looks like whatever Shouji just told him made him age ten more years.

Todoroki's the first to move. He doesn't say anything, doesn't make a sound. He just walks over to her, stoops, and hooks his left hand under her to lift her up. She wriggles, mewling in protest, but eventually lets him settle her against his shoulder with one arm.

She still won't stop crying.

"Police and paramedics will be here soon." Aizawa-sensei's tight voice breaks the spell. His teeth grind so hard Eijirou can almost hear his jaw creak from here. "Two students and a pro hero have been abducted. Your parents and guardians will be contacted. We're sending you all home as soon as possible."

He walks out then, beckoning Shouji to follow. At a motion from him, Tokoyami and Todoroki go with him. Slowly, Mika's cries fade into the distance, and the rest of the students are left in silence.

Bakugou's gone.

Midoriya's gone.

One of the pros is gone, too. Besides their teachers, Eijirou has only seen Mandalay, so who is it—Pixiebob? Tiger? Ragdoll?

Eijirou feels his back hit a wall before he even registers backing away. He was useless in this. Right from the start, he was utterly useless—all because he wasn't strong enough, wasn't smart enough. He couldn't pass the final, couldn't cut it in remedial class—he just plain wasn't good enough. If he had been, if he'd done well enough to earn just one night of play…

He could have been out there with them. He could have helped. He could have fought for them.

Having to ask a child to put out fires caused by villains is, in Shouta's opinion, one last stab of failure for the night.

Mandalay watches Kouta closely, ready with a gas mask from Yaoyorozu in case her nephew shows signs of respiratory problems

from the smoke. She keeps him to the edges, making sure he only keeps the fires from spreading rather than trying to put them out entirely. Once the fire crew arrives with the police, she'll have him stop.

Luckily, the fires have died down on their own since the villains left—Shouta wonders if Dabi's quirk makes them more powerful in his presence. The looped path through the woods is completely clear of gas and mostly clear of flames, so they move in to search the area and douse more of the flames.

They round a bend, and Mandalay halts, bundling Kouta behind her as she calls out a warning. "There's someone ahead! The villains must have left one of their own behind."

Two of them were left, Shouta knows—Kendou and Tetsutetsu took down one, and Tokoyami took out another. "Probably the one that made this gas. Kendou from Class B told us about him."

"It's not," Kouta says, and Shouta almost jumps. The boy hasn't said a word since Shouji delivered news of the abduction. He hasn't cried, and he hasn't talked to anyone, until now. He's clutching his aunt's combat skirt, watching the still, crumpled form lying in the path ahead. "That's him," he says. "He tried to kill me. M-Midoriya—" He has to pause for a moment before he can finish. "Midoriya stopped him."

Shouta motions for Mandalay to stay back while he checks the villain. If it turns out he's playing possum, then erasing his quirk and taking him out again will be quick and easy. With his quirk and capture weapon ready, Shouta nudges the villain, then turns him over with his foot.

He draws back with a sharp gasp.

"Keep him back," he warns Mandalay. "It's not pretty."

"It's okay," Kouta says softly. "I already saw it."

He hears Mandalay gasp sharply—even from the distance, she can see the villain's face. "Kouta, that's—"

"I know," Kouta says. "I know, I saw him—on the news, after…"

It's him, Shouta realizes. The villain who killed the Water Horse heroes two years back. The face and the scar are unmistakable, once

he looks past the blood.

“Midoriya came.” Kouta’s voice is tiny and muffled in Mandalay’s skirt. “H-he came and the villain hurt him but he kept fighting him, and then he—he—”

In spite of Shouta’s advice, Mandalay creeps closer, enough to see how the blood encrusting the villain’s face centers around his right eye. He hears her breathe in sharply through her teeth.

“He couldn’t see,” Kouta says. “So we led him into the gas. But Midoriya got hurt. He got hurt because—he was saving me, and—”

“This isn’t your fault,” Shouta says.

“But—”

“It’s not.” This villain isn’t going anywhere; once the police get here, they can take care of the rest. “I know it’s hard to understand. I know it hurts. But you aren’t responsible for what other people choose to do.” Besides—if it’s anyone’s fault, it’s his. He was the one who let Midoriya run back into villain-infested woods, just to pass a message a few minutes faster than he could have delivered it himself. He was the one who wasn’t cautious enough, who didn’t take enough precautions even after the first attack, even after what happened in Hosu.

It’s really the pinnacle of his failure, that it’s left a ten-year-old boy feeling guilty for being saved.

The police arrive, fire crews arrive, paramedics arrive, and buses arrive. Three villains—two beaten senseless, one drugged and permanently blinded—are taken into custody. The fires are quelled, the wounded seen to, and the rest sent home.

Because of the test of courage, almost half of Class 1B fell victim to the gas. Of Shouta’s own students, only Jirou succumbed, but plenty more need medical attention. Yaoyorozu and Tokoyami overused their quirks, leaving her undernourished and him exhausted. Uraraka and Asui have lacerations, some of which need stitches. Shouji nearly lost a limb to the villain Moonfish. And Todoroki—

He practically has to herd Todoroki onto one of the ambulances. Even if he hadn’t spotted the telltale swelling of a broken wrist, Shouta knows an acute stress reaction when he sees one.

Midoriya’s cat pitches a fit when the paramedics won’t let her go with

him. She follows the ambulance, yowling in protest, until Shouta catches her. She doesn't quite scratch him, but he feels claws catch in his sleeve until he brings her up to the folds of his capture weapon.

She won't stop crying.

Thankfully, none of the police officers comment on the unhappy cat in his arms. They look far too nervous to question things.

"Have you investigated the villains' rendezvous point?" he asks. That was one of the details he got out of Shouji before he was whisked away by medics.

"Well… we found it…" The three officers exchange glances, every one of them nervous.

"And?"

"There's… look, maybe it'll be better for you to check it out yourself." The speaker has gills in his neck that flutter in agitation. "No one wants to stick around there long."

"What do you mean no one wants to stick around?" Shouta snaps. He doesn't mean to be short with them, but he really doesn't have time for this.

"We have reason to believe that the area may be under the influence of a quirk," the gilled officer explains. "It's something psychological, but we aren't sure what it is…" His voice trails off.

Shouta makes to put the cat down, but she clings to him and only protests louder. With a sigh, he changes his mind. "Show me."

It's nearly a mile out from the main training facility, marked out with blackened scorch marks on the ground, and eerily clean-cut branches and undergrowth where a warp gate must have opened and shut. When they get close, the officers' pace starts to slow, and before long Shouta finds himself at the front.

It's not hard to make out why.

The forest is still and empty, and Shouta's conventional senses can detect nothing, but that does nothing to keep back the chills that crawl up his spine. The closer he gets to the rendezvous point, the more he feels it.

It slithers in slowly but inexorably, starting at his spine and spreading like cold poison. Distantly, Shouta remembers a geology lesson from middle school—about how water seeps into the cracks in stone, then freezes, then melts and seeps deeper, until eventually the stone crumbles. It's a little like that—the fear takes hold of him bit by bit, and it's all he can do to put one foot in front of the other to have a proper look around.

It's familiar, that's the problem. It brings to mind things he would rather have forgotten.

Mika shifts in his arms, crawling up to perch on his shoulders. His capture weapon keeps her claws from finding his skin, and he hears her purring. Not happy purring—cats do it to de-stress as well. And Mika is *very* distressed.

Emboldened by his progress, the police on standby follow him and spread out, carrying out their investigation in stone-cold silence.

"Th-this isn't normal," someone mutters, voice small in the syrupy-thick quiet. "This has to be a quirk. R-right?"

Shouta nods tersely. "I've felt something like this before."

"You have?" The speaker this time is someone Shouta knows. Tamakawa Sansa is a common sight for anyone who works with Tsukauchi, though it's less common to see him with his ears flat against his head, his eyes unblinking and fully dilated, and the fur around his neck fluffed up with fear.

"At the USJ," he replies. "Before I fought their Noumu, I felt something like this. Unnatural fear. I assumed at the time that it was one of their thugs, but none of them had a quirk that fit."

"The only ones that escaped were the warp gate villain and the one called Shigaraki, right?" Tamakawa points out. "Their quirks are already accounted for."

"The existence of Noumu changes things," Shouta points out. "We don't know the extent of their research, and therefore we don't know what they're capable of."

"This looks like something a Noumu might've done," one of the other officers remarks. He's standing by a nearby tree, running his fingers over the trunk. There are claw marks scored through it, cutting through bark and into the softer wood beneath. It looks like

something done out of temper—but that's unlikely, because Noumu are mindless.

Midoriya's cat leaps from his shoulder to the ground, meowing as she trots to the center of the scorched area, close to the clean-cut vegetation. Shouta grits his teeth at the plaintive sounds she's making, and wonders if she *knows*. Cats have good olfactory senses. Maybe she can tell that her owner was here recently.

Without warning, Mika's crying rises to a shriek, and Shouta steps forward and reaches for her with a sigh. She darts out of his reach, still yowling, making Shouta chase her—

He stops.

Shouta straightens up stiffly, and looks to the others to see if they feel it too. He finds the police officers watching him, or watching the cat, all of them with visible relief. Tamakawa blinks at him, pupils shrinking back to normal slits, fur lying flat once more.

Slowly, the fear that pervades the air loosens its chokehold on Shouta, eases, and dissipates.

The one-eyed cat runs back and forth in the dark, tail switching, mewing as if calling for her lost owner.

When Katsuki is finally freed from his tiny prison, he comes out swinging.

His first blast catches nothing—the bastards must have gotten wise and given him room at the front. Katsuki turns on his heel, ready to swing out again at anyone coming at him from behind.

Someone knocks his feet out from under him. He twists, trying to correct himself to keep from falling, but he's disoriented from being stuck in a marble and dragged through a warp gate into… wherever the hell he is now. In an instant he's surrounded on all sides, borne to the ground by the weight of numbers. He vents his quirk on them, blasting again and again until he feels his wrists buckle under the strain, but there are too many, and he's been fighting all evening.

He ends up flat on his back on a cold, hard floor, glaring up at the grinning face of the girl holding a knife to his throat. Four clammy fingers close around his face, the fifth hovering an inch away.

“Come on, now,” Shigaraki Tomura tells him in a light, coaxing tone. “Settle down, quiet down. Let’s not scar that pretty face.”

Katsuki snarls and snaps at the nearest finger. Shigaraki laughs, and he feels the pinch and sting of a needle entering his skin. Something like panic rushes through him, and he thrashes in their grip, desperate to force himself up and keep fighting, but his limbs slowly stop obeying.

“Just a little muscle relaxant,” Compress tells him. “Potent, but not harmful. You’ll even get to stay awake through it.”

They drag him up and force him into a chair. Drugs or not, Katsuki fights as much as he can, and with the drugs fresh in his system, he gets a few good kicks in. They shove him down, but he makes them work for it. Straps are secured and locked around him—across his chest, around his arms and legs, and finally a pair of metal clamps secures his wrists to the arms of the chair.

“Had those made special, just for you.” The knife finally leaves his throat, and the girl tickles his nose with the tip of the blade. “Don’t you feel special, Katsuki? Don’t you?”

“Think I can’t blast through them?” Katsuki spits.

“Maybe,” a third voice says. Katsuki doesn’t recognize its owner, and an ugly raccoon face like that is hard to mistake. It looks like it’s stapled together. “Eventually. You’d turn your wrists to charcoal long before then.” His mouth stretches in a smug smirk.

Katsuki pours as much hate as he can into a glare.

“All right!” Shigaraki claps sharply. “Next one! Compress, let him out.”

“Think he’ll scream again?” the girl asks, bouncing on the balls of her feet. “I like his voice! It’s so pretty.”

“One way to find out,” Compress replies, and pulls out another marble. It bursts apart, and Deku falls into the villains’ waiting hands.

He’s not screaming now, but he sounds like he has been. His voice cuts off with a pathetic little whimper and gasp, and he barely even puts up a fight as Compress and the lizard trap his arms.

The scar-faced villain grabs him by the chin and forces his face up.

“Clever little move you pulled,” he says, and Deku looks fucking pathetic right now but Katsuki still wants to kick this shithead’s face in, just to wipe that stupid smirk off his ugly face. “Toga’s right, though, that was an awful lot of screaming. Finally run out of steam?”

He lets go of Deku’s chin, but Deku keeps his face turned upward, just long enough to aim for his face when he pukes.

He almost makes it, too. He gets the bastard in the throat, at least.

Shigaraki cracks up. If he laughs any harder, he’s probably going to piss himself, but he keeps laughing anyway, even as the scarred villain pauses to wipe bile off his neck before punching Deku in the face. The lizard steps forward like he’s going to stop him, but Scarface shoves him off with a blast of fire and punches Deku again.

Three punches in, Katsuki has to look away. It takes two of the other villains to haul Scarface off. He gets one last kick in before he finally storms off to the nearest door. Shigaraki’s still giggling like an idiot, like it’s the funniest fucking thing he’s ever seen.

“Don’t mind Dabi,” he says, as the lizard peels Deku off the floor. “I dunno what he’s so moody about. I mean, we won and everything!”

Deku spits blood, but he aims for the ground this time. Katsuki can hear him breathing from here.

The door slams behind Scarface—Dabi, whatever the fuck—and Katsuki strains to move his head and take in the place. It’s pretty small, pretty plain. The walls are blank and the floor is plain linoleum. There’s only one door, and it looks pretty heavy-duty. There are still a few villains left—Shigaraki, Compress, the lizard, the ugly chick with the club, and the girl. Right now the girl’s focused on Deku, playing with the knife in her hands and just… staring. It’s honestly fucking creepy to watch.

“Sorry about this place,” Shigaraki says with a shrug. “It’s kind of plain and ugly, I know. I wanted to stash you two at our *actual* hideout, but Sensei said this place would be better.”

Sensei? Who the fuck is Sensei?

“Oh! Speaking of which!” Shigaraki leans a little on Deku’s shoulder, which is kind of a feat because Deku looks like the lizard’s the only thing keeping him from tipping over right now. “I told him about you, and I told him we were gonna bring you, and he wants to talk to you

real quick. Cool, right?"

"*Sounds great,*" Deku wheezes, because apparently he's gonna be a suck-up about it.

"Yeah, I was hoping you'd say that." Shigaraki glances down. "Oh hey, that's him now."

It's enough effort just to keep breathing, but Katsuki manages to look down in time to see the floor under Shigaraki's feet change. It goes from ugly linoleum to black tar, oily-slick and shiny. Shigaraki starts sinking into it, and yanks Deku out of the lizard's grip and into the black puddle with him.

Somewhere beneath the blood and bruising on his face, Deku looks like he's ready to throw up again. For a split second his dazed eyes meet Katsuki's.

"K-Ka—" he starts, and the black ink swallows them up before he can get another sound out.

The girl villain squeals. "Oooh, I can't wait 'til he gets back! He was really cute, wasn't he?"

"You're only saying that because Dabi bloodied his face," the lizard sighs.

"He was cute before that, too!" The girl pouts, then turns to beam at Katsuki, and fuck if that isn't the creepiest thing he's ever seen. "You're not too bad, either." The tip of that blade skims up Katsuki's bare arm, and he decides then and there that she's the first one getting napalmed in the face. "Who knows? Maybe you'll grow on me. We've got time." Her eyes glitter at him. "We're gonna have so much fun together."

It's crowded in this place.

It was crowded in the first room, and when Izuku's feet touch solid ground again, he breathes a sigh of relief when he finds himself no longer pressed in by suffocating walls of cold, spectral bodies. Shigaraki's painful grip on his arm eases, and Izuku does his best to stand up straight. That little beating from Dabi didn't do him any favors; he's lucky he managed to turn and take the kick with his back instead of his injured ribs.

It's not the kind of room he expected. The only forbidding thing about it is how poorly lit it is, but that has never been a problem for Izuku. It's not as drafty as the room they just left; in fact, it's comfortably warm, at least partially carpeted, and backed with the gentle whir of machines.

It looks like a hospital room, Izuku realizes. It has the bed for it, its height and slant adjusted to allow the occupant to sit up. And, looking at said occupant—

Izuku's stomach turns.

The man is bathed in shadow, but not nearly enough to hide him from Izuku. For a split second Izuku thinks he must be looking at a ghost, because surely no living person can look like that and still breathe. He checks the eyes, just to be safe—except he can't. Because the man sitting before him doesn't have any eyes.

"Sensei," Shigaraki says—and his voice sounds odd like that, eager, almost bright. Like he's a kid showing off a finished project to his favorite teacher. "The mission was a success. The vanguard squad brought both of them back."

"You did well." Sensei's voice is deep, his tone eerily distorted—probably from the wires and tubes stuck into his throat and face. "I hope you don't mind me borrowing your prisoner for the moment. You've told me so much about him, and I couldn't help being curious."

While they talk, Izuku looks past the disfigured man on the bed to the second figure stepping out of—out of thin air, almost.

At first glance, he isn't much to look at. Just a hunched, slender man with a mop of poorly combed hair that obscures much of his face. Izuku can see this one's eyes, though. This one's dead.

"Boy," the living man says. "Come closer, will you?"

Izuku takes as small a step as he dares. He can feel his own heartbeat in his ears as he looks, not at the eyeless man, but at the ghost that hovers at his side. He locks eyes with the spirit, until he's sure that he's looking back, then raises his hand in a trembling little wave. "H-hello."

This gets the spirit's attention. He stands a little taller, uncurling out of his slouch, and steps forward—

raises his hands—

and *signs*.

Can you see me? He echoes the words out loud, and his speech sounds strangely clumsy, like he knows how the words are shaped but has no way of checking his work to make sure.

“I must say,” the man in the bed remarks. “It is very much a pleasure to meet you, Midoriya Izuku.”

“U-um, yeah,” Izuku says, and tips his chin in the littlest nod he can manage. He keeps his eyes fixed on the ghost. He wonders if he can lip-read. “S-so, um, I guess you probably know who I am, but… wh-who’re you?” His voice cracks.

Do you know Morse code? The spirit asks him. *Or sign? If you are who I think you are, then you’re in very great danger.*

“I would hope you had guessed by now,” says the man in the bed. “If you haven’t, then both I and my student have gravely overestimated you.”

And—he’s right, for all that he doesn’t know that Izuku wasn’t talking to him. He knows exactly who this man is.

It’s not a moment of realization so much as one of acceptance. Izuku has known who this man is since before he walked in, since the moment Shigaraki grabbed his arm and told him he was going to meet Sensei. It’s a strange feeling to be crushed beneath this understanding, because the man before him is in a hospital bed, crippled and blind and hooked up to life support.

This is the man who hurt All-Might. This is the man who murdered Ms. Nana.

With his left hand—the one opposite where Shigaraki is standing, Izuku finger-spells. *I know. Can you help me?*

I’ll try, is the reply. *He won’t kill you—not yet at least. Once you’re away from him, we’ll talk properly.*

“Tomura,” All For One says. “Might I speak with your prisoner alone for a moment? I’ll send him back to you when I’m finished with him.”

Shigaraki shrugs. “Sure. Okay.” The moment the words are out of his

mouth, he sinks into blackness again, and Izuku tries not to sway on his feet.

“Please,” All For One says, gesturing at a chair nearby. “Sit.”

“I-I’d rather—”

“It’s such a small thing, isn’t it?” All For One says. “You’re injured and in pain, and I would like to relieve that, if only a little. I promise you, I only want to talk.”

Izuku steps over and lowers himself gingerly into the chair.

“I’ve been observing your progress with great interest, Midoriya Izuku,” All For One says casually, as if that isn’t the single most terrifying thing he’s heard since Toga Himiko calling him attractive. “I can see why All-Might chose you as his successor.”

Izuku’s heart plummets.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about?” he tries. In any situation that wasn’t this one, it might even be considered a joke. But right now Izuku’s mouth still tastes like bile, and he feels his throat burn as it closes, until he’s gagging and fighting back the urge to vomit.

“Would you like to try again?” All For One sounds almost amused.

“What do you want?” Izuku asks. “I know you’re going to try to kill me eventually. So why—what do you want from me? Are you—” His voice catches again. “Are you going to take away my quirk?”

“My dear boy,” All For One says, with the long-suffering patience of a teacher explaining a lesson for the umpteenth time. “Has All-Might not told you? That quirk of yours cannot be taken by force. Not even by me. Surely he’s told you that by now?”

Izuku grinds his teeth together.

“And I’m not going to kill you, for two reasons,” All For One continues. “The first is that Tomura seems to enjoy your company. I didn’t expect him to like you so much. Do you know why?”

“N-no.” This doesn’t make sense. None of this makes sense. Izuku has talked to villains and been talked at by villains—the slime criminal last year, Shigaraki Tomura himself, Stain and Muscular and Compress and Toga Himiko and Dabi. He’s felt that menace inches away from

him, reaching toward him to grasp at his throat and squeeze, but now it's just *gone*. He sits before the darkest villain in history, and he can't feel even a drop of the grim killing intent that the Hero Killer exuded in noxious waves. It doesn't make sense, it *doesn't make sense*.

"He hates All-Might, you know," All For One says, a little sadly. "He resents everything the Symbol of Peace stands for, and you… well, I expect you have quite a lot in common with All-Might, don't you? You would have to be, for him to choose someone like you." He shakes his head. "All-Might is charismatic and selfless, and he was once powerful beyond measure… but he lacks imagination. There are so many ideas that he simply can't let go of. So… it was a surprise to me, if a welcome one, that Tomura found you pleasant company."

"Oh."

"And the second reason is that, contrary to what you most likely believe, I do have standards. I do not approve of the murder of children."

Izuku chokes.

"*Really*," he rasps.

"Is that so hard to believe?" All For One asks.

"Maybe you should've told Muscular that before he tried to beat a grade-schooler to death for a *laugh*," Izuku spits out. He only realizes his mistake after he's made it, and presses his mouth shut. The room is dead-silent—the machinery whirs, keeping All For One breathing and his heart beating, but the space still feels choked with quiet.

And then—

"He did what?"

And there's that menace, that low-frequency thrum of well-kept rage. Stain's was heavy, dark smog; All For One's is as thick and fowl as clotted blood caught beneath fingernails. Izuku trembles in the face of it, and his only relief is that it's pointed at someone who isn't him.

"Did he happen to return with the rest of Tomura's squad?" All For One's voice curls through the air toward him.

Izuku shakes his head. At some point he switched his gaze to look at the floor, and he doesn't—can't—raise his head now.

“Ah. Good.” And just like that, the menace is gone. It doesn’t drain away gradually—it’s simply there and gone again, leaving Izuku reeling with whiplash. Which is false? Which is true? Both? Neither?

There’s a hand on his shoulder, one that All For One can’t see.

Focus, the spirit tells him. *He does this, twists things. He makes you question things even if you know they’re true.*

Izuku’s hand shakes. *I’m scared.*

Good. You should be.

“But to answer your question, I suppose I’m just curious to speak with you in person,” All For One continues, and Izuku has to pause a moment to remember what he actually asked. “After all, if fate continues unchallenged, the two of us will be enemies someday. I would like to get to know the child who might grow to challenge me one day.” He pauses, while Izuku tries not to tremble. “You’re so… earnest, Midoriya Izuku. And your progress really has been impressive, it’s such a *shame* with your condition.”

“M-my… condition?” Izuku manages to say.

“Tell me,” All For One says gently. “Did you give up your search for your own quirk, when All-Might came to offer you his?”

Izuku goes cold.

Not cold like fear. Cold like a ghost—detached, drifting, on the outside looking in. He stares down, focusing on the imperfections on the floor and the hand on his shoulder.

For the first time since he was dragged through the portal, since he set foot in this room, since he sat down in this chair, he has something.

He has *something.* All he has to do is hold on to it.

There’s a voice in his head, a woman’s voice, and it takes a moment for Izuku to recognize it as Ragdoll’s. *It takes a good liar. Do you think you can tell a lie without talking?*

He raises his head, and it’s not hard to look afraid and uncertain and helpless, because that’s exactly what he is. It’s not hard to look away, and it’s not hard to make it look like shame. He feels small, and it’s easy to show it.

He doesn't say *I'm quirkless.* He doesn't say *My quirk never came.*

He says, very softly, "One For All *is* my quirk."

"Of course it is," All For One says, with a voice full of gentle pity. "Of course it is. I'm sure that's what All-Might told you. He would have wanted to comfort you."

The floor beneath him begins to shift, and he can see the blackness bubbling up again—not a warp gate, but the tar-like portal that All For One used to bring him here.

"I enjoyed our talk," All For One tells him. "I hope to continue it soon. Please remember—if you try to escape, there will be consequences. You may not be the only one to suffer them."

Izuku looks to the ghost just as he releases his shoulder.

I'll be with you shortly, the spirit signs. *I'll tell everyone else about you. It'll be good for them to know.*

The blackness swallows him whole and drops him back into the first room. He doesn't bother fighting as he's manhandled into a chair and strapped to it firmly. He can't fight back, because it's taking enough energy to keep from throwing up again.

He also can't help but notice that his bindings are slightly less excessive than Bakugou's. His classmate glares at him from his own chair, but Izuku can tell it's more a curious glare than an angry one.

"Well," Shigaraki says, slouching comfortably in his own seat. "We might as well get comfortable with each other, huh? We're gonna be spending a lot of time together."

Bakugou curses them until his throat is raw. Izuku ignores him, and ignores the villains. Spinner and Magne and Compress are still here, and Izuku tunes them out until things quiet down for the night—even villains have to sleep. Izuku isn't sure he'll be able to sleep, for all that he can feel exhaustion creeping in.

The ghosts are whispering now, eyeing him. Word must be spreading.

A tap on the arm jolts him out of a trance—not quite a doze. Izuku jumps, but the villains watching them pay him little mind; in a place like this, it's not out of the ordinary to jump awake at every little sound.

Izuku's wrists are bound to the arms of his chair, but his hands are free enough to spell.

Hello again, he says as the spirit crouches down before him. Izuku is grateful for it; it looks less odd for him to be looking down than up.

Got the word out. Are you okay?

No, Izuku answers. The ghost smiles sadly at this, hair falling into his face.

I will try to help you, he says. *I'm not used to being able to act. It's been so long.*

A hero? Izuku wonders. He doesn't look like one. Maybe a civilian caught in the wrong place at the wrong time?

Who are you? he asks.

The ghost blinks at him, looking thoughtful.

That's an interesting question, he says, and smiles again. *I suppose, in the interest of parallels, you might as well call me One For All.*

The ringing phone startles Inko out of a light doze. The TV is on, volume low, and the couch is comfortable enough for her to drift off. She startles initially, disoriented from staying up late, before she remembers where she is and what a telephone is for.

Stifling a yawn, she goes to answer it.

Her world turns to ashes.

"The League of Villains attacked the training camp," is the first thing Aizawa tells him over the phone.

Toshinori feels his guts lurch and twist, and fights against the sensation of thick liquid crawling up his throat. He can already taste iron on the back of his tongue, and it takes all he has to keep from gagging.

Twice now. That's twice that villains have menaced his students while he wasn't there—*three times counting the mall, four counting Stain*—

"Is everyone all right?" he rasps. Of course they're all right. They have

to be. Maybe he wasn't there, but Aizawa was and Sekijurou was and the Pussycats were—six heroes. At the USJ they survived with two, in Hosu three of his students survived with none, and Midoriya faced Shigaraki all by himself. With six heroes, the villains must have been routed.

"They took Bakugou and Midoriya," Aizawa tells him. He says it bluntly. Impersonally. "Three other students witnessed their capture. Ragdoll's missing, too, so we can only assume they took her as well."

Toshinori chokes.

It comes without any warning, not even enough for him to cover his mouth. Blood spatters his carpet, trickles down his chin until the coughing fit subsides. When it's over his forearm is smeared with red, and he doubts he'll ever get the stain out of his carpet.

"Tell me we have something," he gasps, once he can speak again. "Tell me they left something behind."

"They left something behind," Aizawa replies. "Three of their own, in fact. We're still processing the evidence. All of it will be sent to—"

"Tsukauchi's office," Toshinori interrupts. "Has to be. The League of Villains is his case."

"I'll touch bases with him once the rest of the students are on their way home," Aizawa tells him.

"I'll be there," Toshinori says. He can feel another coughing fit coming on, but he swallows it down grimly.

"All-Might." Aizawa begins, and does not continue. His voice is terse, wound so tight that it cracks beneath the pressure. Toshinori can't see his colleague, but he can imagine him gripping the phone until he threatens to break the screen.

Toshinori hesitates. He knows what this tense silence means. There are a million things he could say to fill it, and almost none of them will be helpful. Not to him, not to Aizawa, and not to—

Not to—

"I'll see you then, Aizawa," he says, and hangs up the phone.

He wants to cry. He wants to be sick. He wants to find Shigaraki and

Kurogiri and All For One and every single one of their smugly grinning murderers, and make them regret they ever heard his students' names. He wants to find whatever hiding place they've crawled back to, and rip it down brick by brick.

"Bakugou… and Izuku," he says to no one in his empty apartment, sharp and painful as broken glass shards.

The name of his student, his successor, the boy who, in a much kinder world, would have been his true son, should not feel like that. It should not taste like bile and blood.

"I'm sorry," he whispers. "I'm so, so sorry."

He cleans the blood from his arm and leaves the rest to set in the carpet. He has no time to waste on unimportant things. His students need him.

It takes a moment for it all to click in Izuku's mind. He can't help it; he *gapes* at the spirit, pursing his lips to keep from going slackjawed.

I don't look like much, the ghost signs, looking rueful. *Do I?*

Not really, Izuku replies, and the ghost shakes with soft, hoarse laughter.

That's what my brother thought, too. That's what he always thought. Maybe he was right.

I think I heard you, once, Izuku tells him. *In my head. I was in trouble, and I saw a vision, and… I heard thoughts in my head that weren't mine.*

The power inside you is fueled by our strength, One For All tells him. *Our will. It carries echoes of us, but not the real thing.*

Izuku feels a jolt at how he says it. We. Us. *Are the others here, too?*

No. I met them all, one by one. Some of them fell against my brother. Some of them died naturally and found their way to us later. But they all left eventually. They had to watch over their students. They had their own families and loved ones to visit. One For All's hands falter. *But not me. My brother is all I have left. When he's finally brought down, I'll wait for him, and we can leave together. I've been waiting for so long.*

I'm sorry, Izuku replies. *That must be lonely.*

Another bitter, hoarse laugh. *The dead are never lonely around my brother. I'm just the only one who can look at him without losing myself.*

Izuku thinks of how crowded this room was before, and how empty the room with All For One was. *Does All For One know about you?*

No. None of us can touch him. It frustrates the others—that's why they lose themselves. One For All hesitates, looking thoughtful. *Don't worry about signing in front of him. He has no eyes, and he only has a quirk that lets him sense heat signatures. He can't detect precise gestures.* A bitter look crosses his face. *And even if he could, he never bothered to learn it.*

Izuku isn't sure how to ask his next question. One For All must see it in the look on his face, because he smiles again.

I am deaf, he says. *I wasn't born that way. But I was a sickly child. Too many ear infections added up, and then, when he gave me a quirk, there were… complications.* He touches his ear. *I was already hard of hearing then. But when I woke up after he gave me that quirk, the rest of my hearing was gone.*

That must have been awful, Izuku says, and wishes he could think of something better. His hands fall still, and so do the spirit's.

Izuku looks over to Bakugou. He has no way of communicating surreptitiously to him. Bakugou doesn't know sign, and he's pretty sure neither of them know Morse. He'll have to bide his time, wait for an opportunity.

It won't be like the exam. He won't leave Bakugou behind again. He can't afford to, because this time it will mean leaving him for dead.

He has to be ready.

A quiet tap of his foot makes One For All look at him again. *What can you tell me about All For One?* he asks.

One For All's blank eyes narrow into a determined frown. *My brother may be injured and blind, but he is still strong. He is still ruthless and clever. Be careful how you treat him, how you act around him, or you'll give him something to use against you.* His hands curl briefly into fists. *But, he is also arrogant. And he* knows *he's clever. He likes to be clever.*

Any weaknesses?

Oh, yes. One For All smiles grimly. *The thing about my brother, Midoriya*

Izuku, is that he is an evil man. And evil men like power over people, so they like to see you in fear. He wants you to know you're helpless. And that means that, more than killing, more than winning, he likes to talk.

Izuku thinks about this for a moment.

Good, he answers. *I like to talk, too.* One For All blinks. *Can you tell me about his quirks?*

That I can do. One For All pauses one more time before signing again. *Do you have a plan?*

Izuku ducks his head so that his hair falls into his eyes, partially hiding his face from his captors. *I'm going to let him have the upper hand,* he says.

And then, if I can, I'm going to break it.

Chapter End Notes

> CW: mention of acute stress reaction, kidnapping/imprisonment, nonconsensual drug use (muscle relaxant), claustrophobia, vomiting, emotional manipulation, gaslighting.

Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

AAAAAARRRRT

casper-avery-art

hitamory

twinklingway

galaghiel

biteitwhenitssoft

arachnoodle

juniorattemptsdigital

coffee-and-ramen

somelostartist

As always, this story has a TV Tropes page!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Inko is awake to hear the knock at her door at dawn.

For a few moments she considers not bothering to answer it. She hasn't slept much since getting the call, for all that she wore out both herself and her carpet with pacing and spent the following hours lying in bed. The thought of moving has been unbearable, as if her world is a fragile thing suspended on a fraying thread, and one twitch of a finger will send it shattering.

The jolt of frantic energy strikes her in an instant—*what if they have news? What if Izuku found his way back?*

(It wouldn't be the first time. Once when he was nine years old, his teacher called her frantic, saying he'd gotten lost on a field trip—scant minutes before Izuku turned up on her doorstep, none the worse for wear as he thanked the ghost that led him home.)

Inko throws on a sweater and doesn't bother with her hair before she

goes to answer the door.

Her hope—what little she'd managed to drum up—is for nothing in the end. It is not Izuku on the other side, but a man that Inko has not yet had the pleasure of meeting.

Her son's homeroom teacher stands on her doorstep, and amid all the fear and worry that Inko has been drowning in all night, there's just enough room for her to feel compassion. Aizawa Shouta stands crookedly, as if favoring a recent injury, and he looks like he's had no time for a change of clothes or a wink of sleep. There's a scar beneath his eye that's barely noticeable beneath the bruise-like darkness of exhaustion.

He's holding her son's cat. Inko reaches forward automatically, and Aizawa deposits Mika in her waiting arms. Mika squirms for a moment before settling.

Before Inko can get a word out, Aizawa bends before her in a deep bow.

"Forgive me." His voice is deep and hoarse as he straightens again. "You entrusted your son to my protection, and I failed to live up to that trust. I take full responsibility for what happened." He meets her eyes briefly. "And I swear to you, I will do everything in my power to ensure that your son returns to you safely."

Behind her, Inko hears something fall and clatter, somewhere in the vicinity of the kitchen. She hopes that it isn't Kurosawa again—she can't handle another of his episodes, not now. Not when Izuku isn't here to calm him down.

Mika struggles out of her arms, jumps down, and darts into the apartment, leaving Inko's hands free to grip the doorknob and ground herself.

"See that you do," she says. Aizawa nods to her, and that ends her first face-to-face conversation with the hero Eraserhead.

When he's gone, Inko locks her door and goes to dress herself. She's lucky today; a few more objects fall seemingly of their own accord, the lights flicker and the bathroom mirror rattles, but none of it grows into a full outburst. And so, she dresses herself and fills Mika's bowls, and goes to the kitchen pantry where she keeps the weak flour.

She spreads it on her largest cutting board, a thin layer of white

powder, and steps back.

“Do you know where my son is?” she asks. “Any of you?”

For a moment, nothing. And then, as Inko watches, words form in the flour as if traced by an invisible finger.

He’s not here. That’s Kurosawa writing—she recognizes his careful hand.

If he were dead, he’d come back, Mrs. Matsuda adds underneath. *He’s a good boy.*

I haven’t seen Rei, Morino writes.

That’s—that’s good. If Rei didn’t come back, then that means she’s either with Izuku or out looking, and if she’s looking then she’ll find him. It makes her feel—not quite better, but definitely not worse—to know that Rei might be with him. At least he isn’t alone.

Whatever else happens, Izuku never has to be alone.

We’ll look, Morino tells her. *If we find anything, we’ll let you know.*

Inko feels something like a draft against her back, and pulls her sweater tighter around her shoulders. At her feet, Mika winds around her ankles and mews unhappily.

“I know, sweetheart,” Inko whispers. “I know. He’ll come back, don’t you worry.”

She’s already crying as soon as the words are out. Because it’s true—he will come back, and she knows it, and because she knows it, it can’t even be a true comfort to her.

One way or another, her son will come back to her. All she can do is pray that their next conversation is one that she hears, and not one that she reads traced in flour.

Izuku awakens to someone anxiously patting at his face, and the pain hits him before he can even open his eyes. Ribs. Shoulder. His face, too—Muscular did a number on him, and Dabi certainly didn’t do him any favors.

“Deku. Deku. Asshole, wake up!”

He pries his eyelids apart to find One For All standing over him, lips pursed with worry. Beyond him, in the other chair, Bakugou scowls at him groggily. He must have slept off the drugs they gave him, Izuku realizes faintly. His left foot, the one nearest Izuku, strains against the strap securing it to the chair leg as if he'd been trying to kick him awake.

His first question is *what time is it?* But he doesn't bother asking it—Bakugou probably doesn't know, and the only other people in the room are Toga, Compress, the club-wielding Magne, and Spinner, the lizard man who dresses like a Stain cosplayer, and none of them are likely to—

Wait.

"Hey," Izuku says, or at least tries to say. His throat is dry, making his voice horribly raspy. Spinner sees him looking, and glances over. "Um, what time is it?"

"It's about eight in the morning," the lizard man replies, and yelps when Magne nudges him roughly.

"Spinner," she warns.

"Nonono, it's cool," he says. "This is *Midoriya Izuku*. This kid's got Stain's seal of approval and everything!"

Bakugou jerks his head around to glare at him sharply, and Izuku can only offer a pained look in return.

Shigaraki's on his way, One For All warns.

"To be honest, I'm not really sure what we're bringing him in for?" Spinner goes on. "I mean, I figure if Stain thinks he's good, we might as well let him keep doing what he was doing already. The angry explosion kid I get, but what was the point of kidnapping *him*?"

Bakugou glares at Izuku like he's trying to channel his quirk through his eyes.

The single door opens, and Shigaraki comes in with only a single disembodied hand masking his face. "The point is *my* problem, Spinner," he says, a bit dismissively. "I don't know—or care—what Stain had planned for him. We've already talked. Haven't we?" Around the edges of the hand, Izuku can see the outer fragments of Shigaraki's grin.

Bakugou spits at him.

“I’m here too, asshole,” he snarls when Shigaraki turns to look at him. “If you think I’m dangerous enough to try and take me out this early, then don’t be stupid enough to turn your back on me.”

“Take you out?” Shigaraki echoes, with a trace of a laugh.

“What’s the matter?” Bakugou gives him a smile that shows plenty of teeth and a little bit of gums, as well. “Want me dead already? Are you that scared of me that you have to tie me up first before you try? *Coward.*” He spits again.

Shigaraki laughs.

The unsettling thing about that laugh is how menacing it *isn’t*. It’s almost friendly, as if Shigaraki honestly finds Bakugou funny.

“You’ve got it all wrong,” he says. “Well, except the part about you being dangerous. You are. We like that. Well, I like it, anyway. But we’re not out to kill you.” His smile widens. “We want you to join up.”

For a moment Bakugou gapes at him. Then he laughs right back.

He laughs *hard*. He laughs so loud and so long that Izuku wonders if he’s going to pull a muscle.

“Are you *serious?*” Bakugou almost chokes laughing. “You dumb *shit*, is that seriously what your goal was?” He laughs and laughs until he runs out of air, then takes a breath and laughs again.

Well, that’s one way to do it, One For All remarks dryly.

That’s Bakugou’s way, Izuku answers. *Always has been.*

“Thought you might say that,” Shigaraki says, once the laughter has died down enough for him to get a word in edgewise. “And that’s good too! You wouldn’t be nearly as useful if your resolve was *that* weak. We just have to convince you. And believe me, we can be *very* convincing.” His eyes, half-hidden by pale fingers, alight glittering on Izuku. “How about you? It looks to me like you’ve already got one fan here. And you took a beating from Dabi without passing out. I know for a fact Sensei wants to get to know you.”

Izuku stares at him for a moment, forcing himself not to look to One For All for help. There are two possible answers, of course. One, he

could follow Bakugou's lead and laugh in Shigaraki's face—which is tempting. Two, he could say yes and see what happens. Except—would anyone even believe him if he did?

"W-well—" His voice cracks, and he coughs. "I-I mean, um." He tugs at his wrist restraints. "I'm k-kind of… this isn't exactly a vote of confidence. You know?" He looks to Shigaraki hopefully.

"Nice try," Shigaraki tells him, in the kind of tone that makes Izuku feel nine years old and ridiculed. "But after all the crap you gave us before we took you in, I think *you're* the one who needs to prove himself. Don't you?"

"I—uh—" Izuku hesitates.

Watch what you say, One For All tells him. *Make it too easy and they'll never believe you. Don't say yes, but don't say no, either.*

In the end, Izuku can't think of anything clever or eloquent to say, not with five villains and his childhood bully watching. So he averts his eyes downward, squirms uncomfortably as much as his restraints will allow, and shrugs. "I-I just don't see why I should?" he says softly.

"Deku, what the *fuck*," Bakugou hisses. Izuku tries not to flinch.

"See?" Shigaraki shoots a grin at Compress. "Told you he might come around."

Izuku clamps his mouth shut and tries not to feel sick.

One thing no one mentions about hostage situations is the monotony.

A few hours pass, and Izuku drifts in a trancelike state mind fogged with—of all things—boredom. He only startles out of it when Shigaraki returns and starts messing with his restraints.

"Don't get excited, I'm not letting you walk around free by a long shot," Shigaraki says. "Sensei wants another word with you. I'll come get you later, okay?"

He hears Bakugou's voice, but can't make out the words over the roaring in his ears. The moment the restraints are off, the floor under Izuku's feet shifts and turns to black tar again, sucking him down into the choking dark before he can even cry out.

The room is much the same as it was the previous night.

“Ah. Hello, again.”

Izuku wonders why All For One bothers with that, sounding surprised even though he was the one who brought Izuku here and they both know it. “H-hello.” His own voice sounds weak and thin, even though he isn’t the one with tubes in his throat. “What do you want?”

“Mm.” All For One tilts his head thoughtfully. “Is it not enough to say that I simply enjoyed our conversation last night, and would like to continue it? You’re an intelligent young man, Midoriya Izuku. And when it comes to conversation, well, you can imagine that I don’t have the luxury of variety, or speaking freely, the way I live.”

“I can’t imagine whose fault that is.” Izuku flinches, and not just because One For All flicks his ear in warning. Nerves make him jittery, loosening his tongue until he’s careless and jumpy at the same time. It’s not a good combination, and in a place like this it’s more likely to get him killed than not.

Izuku bites down on his lip until he tastes blood. He braces himself for that cold menace he felt the night before.

All For One laughs.

It isn’t cold or malicious, nor is it a thin mask over anger. No, All For One sounds *delighted*, and somehow that’s even worse.

“No need to be so nervous,” All For One assures him. “That would make me a hypocrite, wouldn’t it? To espouse the luxury of speaking freely, but forbid you from doing the same? And you’re right, anyway —I am the cause of my own situation.” He waves his hand in a gesture that encompasses the hospital bed, the medical equipment, and his own sightless face. “My own choices were what led to this, regardless of my intentions.” He pauses, lowering his hand again. “And, speaking of choices… I trust that Tomura has explained his intentions to you?”

Izuku’s mouth goes dry. He tries to swallow before he speaks again, but cannot gather enough moisture in his mouth. “Yes.” His hands are in his lap, folding and twisting together.

All For One gives a soft hum of approval. “Have you given it much thought?”

A cold hand closes on his shoulder, gripping it with equal parts caution and reassurance. Izuku shoots a quick glance at One For All, glad that the villain before him can’t see it. “I-I… yes, and I’ve been

thinking about it—"

"*Do not lie to me.*"

It's like the flip of a switch. Izuku can't even tell how he feels it, or why—is it the sudden chill in his tone? Is it the way All For One sits? Is it a quirk? It feels like it could be, the way the menace curls around his throat, tightening like a warning tug on a choke chain. The room is just as empty as it's always been, but Izuku finds it hard to breathe. This is nothing like what he felt from Stain. Stain's menace was a hammer, or a meat cleaver—heavy and blunt and unwieldy, a tool made to crush and break. All For One's menace is a scalpel, sharpened and thin enough to slide under the skin and *peel*.

"Come now, my boy." And in an instant it's gone, leaving Izuku huddled in his chair, trying not to gasp for breath. "Speak freely. There are many sins in this world worth punishing. Honesty has never been one of them."

"W-what do you want me to say?" The words are out before Izuku can stop them. "You know who I am. You know *what* I am. You can't—you can't possibly think I'd join you. You want to talk choices? I've made mine, and you know that already." His voice cracks. "So why—why am I here? What do you want from me?" He has never felt so alone. Rei couldn't come with him. Nana isn't here. Tensei isn't here. None of his friends, living or dead, are here.

The hand at his shoulder squeezes again, and he watches it sign in the corner of his eye. *Don't lose heart now, Izuku. You can do this. I know you can.*

One For All is here. Outside of this room is every ghost, every soul that All For One has ever killed.

However he may feel, he's not alone. *He's not alone.*

"Yes," All For One says. "I know this already. And, at the end of the day, I have no quirk that can take away your free will, no matter what you choose to do."

(Izuku glances at One For All. *Well, he's not lying about that, at least,* the spirit tells him with a wry look.)

"But with a decision as heavy as this, Midoriya Izuku, I think you deserve to make it with your eyes open. You deserve to make the *right* choice."

“I—what?” Izuku stares at him. “What are you talking about?”

“I—” For the first time, All For One seems to hesitate. “I won’t patronize you by pretending to understand your feelings, and your experiences. Because, quite simply, I don’t.” He heaves a sigh. “So many of my successes were the result of luck of birth. Right from the start, I was gifted with something so… so unique. I know that. And because of that, I don’t know what it’s like to struggle as I know you probably have. Being born functionally quirkless, in the world we now live in, is a painful, lonely thing, and an ordeal that I will never truly understand.” He pauses. “But that doesn’t mean I cannot sympathize. And I can still wish you the best, in spite of your circumstances.”

“Um,” Izuku hesitates. “Th-thank you? I still don’t understand what you—”

“You see me as an enemy,” All For One says. “As the ultimate enemy, even. Well, I’m sorry, but I cannot say the same.” He pauses, and when Izuku doesn’t answer, he shakes his head. “No. I see a child with a clever mind and limitless untapped potential. Potential that it would be a tragedy to waste.”

“Don’t worry,” Izuku answers quietly. “I don’t intend to.”

All For One falls silent for a moment. “Then, are you sure you’ve made the right choice?” he asks at length.

“Yes—”

“I don’t just mean the right choice for the world,” All For One says. “What about the right choice for yourself? For others like you?”

There are no others like me, Izuku thinks. *I’ve looked.* Out loud, he says, “I’m going to be a hero. That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

“And you will, I’m sure,” All For One tells him. His voice is warm. “You always could have been. I wish All-Might could have seen it.”

Izuku jerks his head up at this. “Wh-what? He *did* see it.”

“No,” All For One says sadly. “He didn’t. That’s the true tragedy of this, I think. Of your potential. You could have been so great, and he couldn’t see it.”

“You’re wrong.” Izuku’s voice shakes. All of him shakes. “He did see it, that’s why he *gave* me his power in the first place—”

“Yes,” All For One says. “He gave you his power.” For a moment, he sits silently and seems to watch Izuku with his scarred, eyeless face. “Did he see your potential? Truly see it? Or did he simply see the potential of a new vessel—one that would take his power and make it stronger than before?”

Izuku grinds his teeth.

“It isn’t his fault,” All For One goes on. “I’m sure he didn’t mean to hurt you, or to devalue you. But as I said, the man lacks imagination, and it keeps him from trusting in others, and believing in them—”

“He *did* believe in me,” Izuku snaps, ignoring when One For All hisses softly through his teeth. “He *does* trust me, and you’re not going to—”

“How much did he tell you, when he first offered it to you?” All For One asks. “Did he tell you what you were truly inheriting, when he forced his power on you?”

“He didn’t force *anything* on me!” Izuku’s nails bite into his palms. “It was *my* choice—!”

“Did he tell you about me?” All For One asks. “What I am capable of? What I did to him? What he, in turn, was forced to do to me? I’ll bet you he didn’t. And can you really say that it was your choice, when you made it on half-truths and lies by omission?”

“St-stop it,” Izuku grits out.

“He forced a legacy of death and tragedy on your shoulders,” All For One tells him, in a voice so full of compassion that it makes Izuku’s stomach squirm. “Because that was the only way he knew. I bet he told you that you could be a hero, didn’t he? Even that would have been a lie, because he did not believe that *you*, yourself, could be a hero. He could only truly believe in you if you had a quirk. If you had *his* quirk.”

“You’re *wrong*—”

“And if I am, I will happily admit to it,” All For One replies. “I will not claim to be infallible as he does. Because that is the society that All-Might has created: one where he stands as a paragon while hiding his weaknesses behind a smile, and others are encouraged or even forced to do the same. All-Might *lies*, my boy, whatever his intentions are. He lies and keeps the people beneath him ignorant—even you. If he kept my presence from you, what else do you imagine he’s hiding? But I—”

All For One places his hand over his chest. “I will not lie to you. The world that I live in, in shadows and street corners that All-Might’s light cannot reach, is a harsh one. It is a cruel one. But that is only because it is an *honest* one. I will not always be able to protect you, but I swear to you, Midoriya Izuku, I will never lie to you. Even if there is no trust between us, I *respect* you too much for that.”

Izuku opens his mouth, furious, ready to lay out exactly why everything he just said is bullshit—because of course All For One lies, and just because All-Might was wrong about something doesn’t make All For One automatically right—before a cold hand closes gently over his mouth.

Let him win, One For All tells him. *Let him have these victories.*

Izuku clenches his teeth, and his nails dig further into his own flesh.

It’s advice that he’s heard before, and recently. Make him go after a weakness that isn’t there.

Tell a lie without talking.

There’s an easy way to fold, of course, without having to come up with words. Tears have always come easily to Izuku, even at times like this, when he has to force them. It’s not so difficult.

He thinks of Nana standing in his room, broken and bleeding. Sachi vanishing from the beach and leaving an empty car and a ring behind. Kurosawa, forgetting that the night of his death happened years ago. He thinks of Todoroki holding onto him as the portal closed. He thinks of Iida spiraling into darkness after Tensei died.He thinks of the second grade, of the look on Kacchan’s face as he slammed the closet door shut before Izuku could escape.

All For One can’t see the tears that drip down to Izuku’s chin, but he can hear the quiet, shuddering sobs that wrack his body.

“I’m… sorry,” Izuku hears him say. “I did not want to push you so hard, but it was the only way that you could understand. You deserved so much better, and I would like a chance to give it to you.”

Izuku’s hands shake as he muffles his sobbing into his sleeve, but he doesn’t answer.

“That’s enough for now,” All For One says gently. “I’ll give you a moment, and then I’ll call Tomura to walk you back.”

Izuku lets the tears run their course. He's still sniffling when Shigaraki comes in, and he knows his eyes are probably red and swollen, but that's fine. He's made it through another meeting with All For One alive, and that's all that matters.

The hallways nearest to All For One's room are…

crowded.

Shigaraki keeps four fingers on his arm and fills the silence as he leads the way back, but Izuku barely pays attention. He's too busy nudging ghosts out of the way, and memorizing the route. Even if he can ask ghosts for directions in a pinch, it's nice to know his own way around. It's not easy, which is why he only half-listens to what Shigaraki is saying. The path twists through hallways and corridors, and it's lucky that some of the doors are numbered, so there are at least a few landmarks that he can count on. The lights flicker on and off overhead. The wiring must be faulty in this building, wherever or whatever it's supposed to be.

You did good, One For All tells him at one point. *I'll be right back—there are a lot of us, and I want to make sure everyone knows about you.*

It's after One For All leaves him that Izuku passes by a partially open door.

With a quick glance at Shigaraki, Izuku risks slowing down to have a quick look inside. A passing spirit sees him do it and helpfully tries to push it further open. She seems surprised when it actually works. Izuku flashes her a grateful smile and looks in—

His heart drops to his stomach. His hands are shaking, and he prays that Shigaraki doesn't notice.

Shigaraki's still talking, but now there's no way that Izuku can listen. He'd thought that he and Bakugou were the only ones the villains took from the forest. But even with a brief glimpse into the room, Izuku recognized the third prisoner's face, and the bright blue hair that stood out vividly against her hospital gown.

Ragdoll. They took Ragdoll, too.

It should have been obvious. He should have thought of it before now. Ragdoll had been isolated from the other heroes, and even from the other students. She's quick and clever but she lacks a combat-oriented quirk, and—

Her quirk.

Tracking. Locating. Seeing weaknesses. It's a useful quirk—the kind of quirk All For One might want. Has he taken it from her already?

If he has, then that could mean that he can find them at any time. That could mean escape is completely impossible. That could mean—

"*De-ku.*"

Izuku almost trips.

Shigaraki has just led him around a corner. Up ahead, at another bend in the hallway, is Tsubasa.

It takes a moment for Izuku to force himself to walk again. Tsubasa's broken wings trail on the floor, and his black eyes watch Izuku come closer and closer. Izuku clenches fists and tries to steady his breathing, but it's hard—it's hard when Tsubasa reaches out to clutch at his arm and tug him in the opposite direction that Shigaraki is leading.

Izuku shakes his head stiffly, hoping Tsubasa has enough lucidity to understand. His luck holds— Tsubasa tugs him once more before letting go and wandering away. Izuku watches over his shoulder as Tsubasa takes a different path, and vanishes around another corner.

"C'mon, quit making me drag you," Shigaraki snaps, and Izuku ducks his head and follows.

Shouto spends far less time at home than he does at the hospital.

And that's fine. Endeavor is busy, now that the League of Villains has made such a bold move. He isn't around to tell Shouto what to do or where to go. And so, when he's finished having his wrist treated, there's no point in going home.

Compared to some of the others, Shouto got off lightly. A simple fracture is an easy fix for a doctor's quirk, and he's left with healed bones and instructions to keep the wrist brace on for at least a week. Jirou still hasn't woken up from the gas, along with half of Class 1-B, and Aoyama inhaled enough of it to need medical attention. Yaoyorozu half-starved herself overusing her quirk. Shouji, Uraraka, and Asui needed stitches.

By now, Yaoyorozu is up and about again, though Shouto hasn't seen

much of her. He's glad of it; she was worried about Midoriya, and once she finds out he was one of the last people to see him, she'll…

Well, she'll want to talk. She'll have questions that Shouto won't want to answer.

But until then, Shouto can keep things at an arms length. He can drift along among his classmates and friends, shielded by a barrier of fog that keeps the barbs from digging in deep and locking in his flesh.

He doesn't want to think about it. If he thinks about it, then he'll feel it, and if he feels it then…

Well, then he'll probably stop being able to think at all.

"Todoroki."

Shouto starts. He feels stupid for it a moment later; he's not in the woods, he's not on a battlefield; he's in a brightly-lit hospital hallway in broad daylight, and it's only Uraraka. She isn't even shouting at him. Her hand is on his arm, but she isn't grabbing or squeezing. It's just a touch, just to get his attention.

He keeps his voice quiet. He has to, or he'll snap at her, and whatever he might be feeling right now, she doesn't deserve that. "What, Uraraka."

"I need to talk to you." Her hand doesn't leave him.

"Then talk."

"Not here." Now her hand presses, pushing him to turn around and face her. When he does, he has to look away almost immediately. Her eyes are bright, too bright, and every bit as desperate as Shouto is trying not to feel. "Todoroki, *please*."

"Are… you all right?" The moment the words are out, Shouto shuts his mouth to keep from asking another, equally stupid question.

"I—" She isn't crying, thank goodness, but she looks close. She looks like she might cry if he refuses. "I need—I need your help."

However Shouto might feel right now, he can't ignore those words.

He lets her lead him out of the hallway, down a flight of stairs, and outside to an empty courtyard. Even with no one in sight, Uraraka scans the area just to be certain, as if she's checking for hidden

cameras, or making absolutely sure that no one's hiding behind that potted ficus in the corner.

"Uraraka, what is going on." Shouto is tired. He is tired and frustrated and helpless and scared witless, and that combination does not translate well to patience.

By this point she's let go of him. Now, she presses the palms of her hands to her eyes. It takes her a moment to answer.

"I don't know who else to talk to." She whispers it, and Shouto steps closer to hear her better. "I shouldn't have even found out, I wasn't supposed to—Momo wasn't supposed to tell me, and it's *not her fault*, I was panicking and she was just trying to help, and I—I'm *scared* to ask Iida because after what happened to his… I don't know how he'll react, I don't…" She lowers her hands from her eyes to look at him—ah. Now she's crying. "I need you to talk me out of something. And if you can't, or you won't, then I need you to help me do it."

Shouto shakes his head. "You've… lost me. What wasn't Yaoyorozu supposed to tell you?"

"She tracked it." Uraraka's eyes shine with tears and desperation, and her arms move stiffly to cross over her chest. "The Noumu that the villains brought to the camp. She put a tracker on it, and that's how they're going to find them. That's how they're going to get Deku and Bakugou back."

Something stirs deep within the hollow pit in his chest. Shouto forces himself to ignore it. "I don't understand," he says, forcing his voice steady. "What's there to talk about? That's a good thing, isn't it?"

Uraraka's fingers tighten on her arms, pinkies raised so she won't use her quirk on herself by accident. "Yes," she says. "I-it is. It *should* be. But…" She's so tense now that she's trembling. "It would be easy, if I talked to Momo. She—I know how she feels, and I bet I could convince her to let me…"

"Let you what?" Even as he asks, he can feel comprehension knitting itself together in his head. "Uraraka, what are you trying to do?"

She jerks her head up to look at him, and her eyes bore into his. "Go after Deku and Bakugou. *What else*."

It's only now that Shouto realizes how tightly he's clenching his fists. His nails bite into the palms of his hands. "The heroes will already—"

“I *know*, Todoroki!” It’s the closest Uraraka has ever come to raising her voice at him. She thrusts her arms to her sides as she snaps at him, hair falling into her face. “I know. I know the heroes are already on it. I know All-Might’s going to be there. I know it’s dangerous and stupid and pointless and *I know there’s nothing I can do*.” Her voice cracks, and he’s close enough to see the tears gathering in her eyes. “But Todoroki, I—I can’t just stand back and do nothing. I can’t do that again.”

“What do you mean ‘again’?” Shouto breaks in. “You did *plenty*. Asui told me you fought one of the villains yourself. You made it possible for us to go after them in the first place!”

“And what good did it do?” Uraraka’s hands move to her hair, fingers twisting in the brown strands. “At least you—y-you, and Shouji, and Tokoyami, you faced them, and you fought against them and you did everything you could. You—you even got *hurt*, Todoroki.” Her eyes fall on his splinted wrist, and Shouto moves it behind his back, but before he can get another word in, her tears are falling and his tongue is caught fast in his own mouth. “And I didn’t help. They took him—they took both of them, I didn’t do *anything*.”

“Are you not hearing me?” Shouto steps closer, taking his chance to talk when Uraraka stops to scrub at her streaming eyes. “You helped us reach them—”

“I could’ve gone with you,” Uraraka rasps out. “I could’ve used my quirk on myself and I could’ve gone with you and I could’ve helped, but I didn’t—”

“Doesn’t that just make you sick?” Shouto points out. He feels helpless, and it’s nothing new. He can’t stand that he’s used to feeling helpless.

“I know.” Uraraka presses the heels of her hands against her eyes. “I know it doesn’t make any sense, and I know it’s stupid, and that’s why—that’s why I need your help. So please.” Her voice gives out, cracked to pieces by her tears. “*Please*. Talk me out of this. Tell me it’s a stupid idea. Help me.”

It should be simple.

By rights it should be simplest thing he’s ever done, the easiest truth he’s ever told.

“It’s a stupid idea,” he says.

He opens his mouth to tell her more, to tell her that he'll bring Iida into this if he has to, because it's stupid and pointless and by law and common sense they shouldn't do anything except stay safe at home and let the heroes handle it.

"You gave me two choices," he says. "To talk you out of it or help you do it."

Slowly, Uraraka lowers her hands from her face. Red-rimmed eyes stare at him in shock.

"Damn it, Uraraka," Shouto shakes his head. "Now *I'm* the one that needs to be talked out of this."

Bakugou initiates the first attempt.

It's in the evening, during one of their scheduled restroom breaks. The villains watch Bakugou like a hawk, and Compress in particular always accompanies him, ready to use his quirk at a moment's notice. It's not until he's coming back, and it's Izuku's turn to go out, that either of them catch an opening.

It's mostly Spinner's fault. He jumps the gun, undoing Izuku's restraints before the others have Bakugou secured. Izuku slips one arm free a little quicker than Spinner probably would have liked, and Bakugou catches his eye right as Compress is about to start locking him down again.

Apparently he's had a lot of time to build up sweat on his hands. A well-aimed blast knocks Compress back, and Izuku sees his own chance and takes it.

The chair is made of plastic and cheap metal, easily bent and broken enough for Izuku to break free. A kick to Spinner's face clears the way, and he looks up to see Bakugou already going for the door. Izuku hurtles after him and slams the door behind them, if only to buy them an extra split second.

"Don't fucking follow me," Bakugou snarls at him, and for once Izuku sees sense in it. If they stay together, then they're more likely to get caught together. But if they split up, then one of them might just slip through.

"They have Ragdoll too," Izuku tells him. "Their leader can steal quirks. Be careful." He sees Bakugou's eyes widen, right before they

split at a fork in the road.

By rights, Izuku should search for an exit. It won't be hard; there are plenty of dead here to ask. He doesn't know that Ragdoll's quirk has been taken. There might still be hope that he can escape unnoticed. Even if he has to leave Bakugou behind, he can take what he knows back to the heroes.

Or at least he could, if that plan weren't horrendously risky, because once he's gone they'll definitely respond accordingly. They could change location, or far worse.

And besides.

He isn't the only one here who needs help.

He gets turned around at one point, out of necessity. There are footsteps behind him—whose? He has no way of knowing. It could be Toga, or Spinner, or Dabi, or…

Or Compress. He really, really hopes it isn't Compress.

Hands yank him out of the main hallway and drag him around a few corners, until the sounds of his pursuers fade. One For All has him by the shoulders, and then releases him to sign.

I can take you to an exit. There's no guarantee you won't be intercepted, but it's the best chance you have.

They have Ragdoll, Izuku says. *You didn't tell me they had Ragdoll.*

One For All goes still for a moment. *I'm sorry,* he says. *I should have. But I was worried that you wouldn't be able to focus on your own survival, kind of like you're doing now.*

Has he taken her quirk? Izuku asks. One For All shakes his head. *Good. What's the fastest way to get to her?*

One For All fixes him with hard stare. *She's sedated. You'd have to wait for the drugs to wear off, or carry her out.*

Izuku grinds his teeth. He's frustrated. The sensible thing to do is run and escape, but—

There's just too much. There's too much he's seen, too much he knows, and—

One For All sees something over his shoulder and stiffens. A wordless groan reaches his ears, and Izuku whirls around right as familiar cold hands latch on to his arm.

"*De-ku.*"

Tsubasa isn't alone this time. There's a man, tall and lanky and every bit as distorted and deformed as he is. He stands hunched and half-naked, pale-skinned with six drooping eyes that leak viscous black ooze.

A memory comes to Izuku unbidden—*the bullet train to Shinjuku, heading through Hosu City. An emergency stop, seconds before a hero came crashing through. And climbing after him, shrieks and moans grating in its throat, with six staring eyes—*

"Noumu," Izuku murmurs. "You both—you're—"

Tsubasa tugs at him desperately. "*Deku.*"

Izuku shoots One For All an apologetic look, and follows.

The distorted figures phase in and out of view. Sometimes Izuku barely sees them at all, and can only follow images flickering in his peripherals. He knows that ghosts lose stability and control when their emotions are high, but these ghosts… It's like they never had stability to begin with.

Before long, he finds himself in a familiar hallway. The room where he saw Ragdoll isn't far. He can get to her if he hurries—

Tsubasa takes hold of his arm again to pull, and Izuku can only follow, eyes burning with unshed tears.

Izuku follows Tsubasa down a different hallway, around a corner, until the hallway ends at a single small room. It's barely big enough to be called such; it's more like a tiny anteroom, leading to whatever is beyond the heavy metal door that Tsubasa is drawing him toward. Once Izuku is inside, Tsubasa lets go and vanishes through.

Izuku takes hold of the handle.

Locked.

A hand descends on his arm again. Izuku turns around and finds himself staring into One For All's wide white eyes.

He's coming, he says. *It's Compress, and he's about to corner you. They won't hurt you or kill you for this, I promise. Don't fight, don't give them a reason to—*

Izuku is already looking past him, at the masked, sharply dressed villain stepping into the anteroom with an irritated sigh.

"Try not to throw up again this time," Compress says.

The room lights up green as Izuku activates his quirk. He aims not for Compress but for the empty space next to him, leading out to freedom —

The villain's gloved hand flashes out. Izuku opens his mouth to scream, and the world goes tiny again.

Chapter End Notes

> CW: kidnapping/imprisonment, emotional manipulation, attempted grooming, hospitals, claustrophobia, character purposely exposed to a phobia as punishment.

Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

> OK full disclosure guys, I joke a lot about not being sorry for doing terrible things to characters but uh... I might actually be sorry this time. No one dies, but... well, be warned, this chapter gets a little... rough. See the end note for more detailed warnings.
>
> Anyway, here's more art!
>
> cricketmilk
>
> thephilosophah
>
> things-i-cannot-do-in-amity-park
>
> strawberrypad
>
> liteskinfroppy
>
> heidi3399
>
> starburstdragon
>
> As always, this story has a TV Tropes page!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuku does not throw up this time.

He does, however, panic. And this means that when Compress finally frees him, he comes out swinging. His fist connects with a jaw almost hard enough to be satisfying, and the answering blow has fire behind it. Colored lights explode in Izuku's vision, and he lashes out blindly before someone grabs his arm and twists it behind his back.

"If you keep struggling, I'm going to put you back," Compress tells him. He's calm when he says it. Not angry. Not even frustrated. "And I can keep putting you back and taking you out again, for as long as I need to. Do you want that?"

Izuku's fists throb from clenching so tightly, but when he tries to strike again, his arm will not respond. He tries to make himself move, tries to make himself want to move, but in the end he can only struggle halfheartedly as they wrest him back into the chair. His eyes

slide over to the other, and what little hope he has left slips away. Bakugou is already bound again, looking considerably more worse for wear. There's blood dripping from his nose, and more smeared at his mouth and chin. His lips are parted, showing his clenched teeth in a snarl.

So—first attempt was an utter failure. That just means the second attempt will be even harder. Izuku ducks his head and tries to look as small as possible.

It doesn't work.

"Look out!" He registers a ghost's warning cry a split-second too late. Izuku looks up just in time to catch Shigaraki's fist with his face.

Four clammy fingers grab him by the chin, heedless of how tender it is from being struck, and wrench his face upward. "Stupid. That was very stupid." Shigaraki speaks close enough to his face for Izuku to smell his stale breath. "You think there's nothing I can't hold over your head, just because you aren't in a crowded mall." Izuku's stomach turns to lead. Behind the severed hand, Shigaraki's eyes glitter. "Cross me again, and it won't be just you regretting it." He releases Izuku roughly enough to send his head cracking against the back of his chair. "The only reason I'm not doing it now is that you were actually a pretty great help. You went the wrong way, and you ended up so far from any of the actual exits that we didn't even have to worry about you, and we could focus on tracking *him* down instead."

"Deku, are you *fucking serious,*" Bakugou hisses at him, almost spitting with fury.

Izuku ducks his head then, and lets his hair fall over his eyes. If he sits like this, then he can at least pretend no one can see the pathetic horror that he knows is showing on his face.

"We got pretty lucky," Shigaraki goes on airily. "If you'd taken one more wrong turn, you might've found—well. Never mind. That's not for *you* to know."

Izuku keeps still. Is he talking about Ragdoll? If he's talking about Ragdoll like it's a secret, then… that means they don't know that *Izuku* knows about her.

Someone touches his face, and Izuku startles back into his chair. Toga stands before him, bouncing on the balls of her feet as she rubs a bit

of blood between her thumb and forefinger.

“You sure bleed a lot,” she remarks brightly. “We’ll have to have a little, ah, *talk* soon. I wouldn’t want it to go to waste.”

Whatever *that* means.

The lights in the room flicker a little. The power must be faulty still. It hasn’t happened often, that Izuku has been able to see, but since he hasn’t seen much of anything besides this room, it could be useful to keep in mind.

The next touch is a gentle one, a light tap from One For All to get his attention. *I’m sorry,* he says. *I should have been more helpful to you then. I’m not… used to this. Acting, instead of observing.* He shakes his head. *What you did was foolish, but you weren’t wrong. That hero’s time is running out—my brother won’t keep her much longer without taking her quirk, and once he’s done that, he’ll either discard her or use her further. And I don’t know which is worse.*

Izuku keeps his eyes on the villains around him, watching through the gaps in his tangled curls. *I don’t think I’ll get another chance to escape like that anytime soon*, he says. *But if I can at least wake her up and free her, then maybe she has a better chance than me. You said she was sedated. Is there a way to counteract that?*

The ghost’s eyes light up. *Wait here,* One For All tells him. *I’ll ask around.*

On the second morning after Izuku is taken, his belongings arrive on Inko’s doorstep. It isn’t much—just his clothes and toiletries, personal camping supplies, everything he took with him on the trip. Someone even managed to find his phone in the woods; the screen is cracked in several places, but otherwise it’s still in working order.

She puts his clothes in the laundry basket, puts away the rest of his things, and picks up his phone.

Inko does know the passcode. She’s never used it before—she’s not the sort of parent to go snooping through her son’s texts—but they both can unlock each other’s phones, just in case of emergencies. This is an emergency.

At first she only wants the number from his contacts; if the person she wants to speak to cares about her son as much as she thinks (hopes)

he does, then calling him from her son's phone will only alarm him needlessly.

But when she calls from her own phone, no one answers, and the line goes straight to a pre-recorded voicemail greeting. Inko grits her teeth and tries once more before she gives up, and calls from Izuku's phone.

It's picked up after two rings.

"*H-hello?*" He stammers. Inko has never imagined him stammering. He doesn't seem like the sort of person who would ever stammer.

For a moment, her voice sticks in her throat. But she rallies herself, and presses on.

"My name is Midoriya Inko," she says. It's a good place to start, to let him know that the name that probably popped up when the call came through is not the name of the person talking to him. "I—I know you must be busy. And I hope I won't take up too much of your time. But —there's something I was hoping to ask you. I don't think it's something you'll want overheard." Her throat bobs as she swallows. "If—if you're in the middle of something right now, then it can wait. But if you have any time at all—" Her voice catches. "I'd like to talk to you face to face. I think it's overdue."

He knows her address already. Of course he does. He's a teacher, after all; even if Izuku wasn't the one to tell him, he has access to her son's student file. It takes him all of ten minutes to arrive on her doorstep. Inko has to wonder if he even needed transportation.

And that is how she finds herself with All-Might in her living room, hunched and uncomfortable on her sofa with a cup of tea dwarfed in his hands, and Mika attempting to climb into his lap. There haven't been ghosts in her house in a while—they're all out looking.

All-Might has a ghost, Inko remembers. She teaches Izuku things, and makes jokes about his height. Inko wonders if that ghost is out looking, too.

"Mrs. Midoriya—"

"I need you to know that I'm not blaming you."

He doesn't look like he believes her. Her voice comes out harder and harsher than she intended, but that's the fear leaking in. And even if he does believe her, it looks like he's blaming himself plenty.

Good, a harsher, crueler part of her thinks. She does her best to squash it down.

"And even if I was, this isn't about blame," she continues. "This is about talking to you about my son, which as I said is long overdue."

The hero before her shuts his eyes. It's almost a flinch. "Mrs. Midoriya, I swear to you that we are doing *everything*—"

"I don't want platitudes," she says coldly. "I don't want to be reassured, because I can't be reassured. I want the truth. So tell me, All-Might—did this happen because of One For All?"

It's not that All-Might has been fidgeting much since he arrived, but now he *freezes*. His eyes are wide as he looks at her, blue and ringed with black. Not even his hands shake.

"You're surprised," she says. "That… that *bothers* me, that you would bring that kind of change to my son's life and expect him not to tell me, but that's a problem for another day. I know my son has his own life and is old enough to make informed decisions, but *I don't like not knowing things about him*." She sets her own cup down, more forcefully than is polite. "Since yesterday, I've had nothing but apologies and reassurances, and if I hear one more promise that someone's doing 'everything in their power' to find my son, I might scream. So answer me honestly." She looks him in the eye. "Was he targeted because of the power you gave him? Do you know what they want with him?"

"It's possible," he answers. His voice is tight. "This attack was spearheaded by Shigaraki, the villain who—who accosted him at the mall. I don't think it likely that he knows about the connection between myself and young Izuku, but—it might—" His jaw clenches. He isn't trying to smile. "How much did your son tell you?"

"About One For All and what it can do. About your offer. And… that there was something else he couldn't tell me." Inko pauses. "Some other secret you had, that was not his secret to tell, and was dangerous to risk exposing. I told him that I didn't have to know if it didn't put him in danger, and he didn't tell me."

"Ah." All-Might gives a short sigh, and places down his own cup. He hesitates, and his face is hard to read but it looks like he's mentally wrestling with himself. "I understand. And for what it's worth, you're right. I've… I've done you wrong, and you deserve the truth." He puts his hands on his knees and bows his head, and—

In an instant he's swathed in clouds of smoke. Inko tries not to startle, and rises to open a window.

"Wait." There's something different about All-Might's voice. The pitch is the same, but something in the timbre and underlying resonance has changed. It sounds less like low thunder, less like the voice of a symbol, and more like…

Well, more like a *voice*.

"This can't get out," All-Might tells her, as the smoke dissipates and reveals him once more.

Inko sits back down, hard.

"This is the truth," the frail skeleton of a man continues. "The truth is that I have fought the leader of the League of Villains before—not Shigaraki Tomura, but the man behind him—and this was the result. The truth is that I have no reason to believe this shadow leader *doesn't* know that I passed my power to your son. The truth is that I don't know what he wants with young Izuku, but it can't be good. The truth is—" His voice breaks. His gaunt face is dry and smooth of emotion, but Inko can see it burning in his sunken eyes. "The truth is that I fear for him."

Izuku has spoken before about the appearances ghosts sometimes have. Injured, crippled, and deformed appearances. She wonders if this is how he sometimes feels, seeing someone damaged beyond repair and wondering how they got to be that way.

"Thank you," she says softly. "For being honest."

"It was never my intention to come between you and your son—"

"You didn't," Inko tells him. "All-Might, my husband passed away years ago, and I have raised my son almost single-handed ever since." (The *almost* is a sticking point—she feels it isn't her place to tell him about the ghosts before Izuku has the chance, but she has to give credit where it's due.) "I know my son has his secrets, and I know that even when he tells the truth he'll omit things to keep from worrying me, but at the end of the day, we've built up a lot of trust between us. That trust can survive you." She folds her hands tight together, whitening her knuckles with pressure. "And I can tell that—that Izuku feels the same about you. I thought it was just admiration, and maybe it was at first, but… he does trust you. So, in spite of everything, I'm going to trust you, too." She catches All-Might's gaze and holds it.

“Please don’t make me regret it.”

He dips his head to her, practically bowing while still seated. “You may be tired of hearing it, but it *is* the truth: I will not rest until both of my students are safe.”

“Thank you,” she answers, rising from her seat. All-Might stands up a moment later. “And… thank you, for trusting me as well.”

He nods, probably seeing the way she takes in his appearance.

“I have to say,” he says quietly, as he steps toward her door. “You’re taking this… not as poorly as I expected.” He gestures vaguely at himself, at the way his hero costume hangs so loosely on his form.

“We all have secrets,” Inko tells him wearily. “I do. My son does. You aren’t special.”

All-Might blinks at her, and for a moment the creases of worry in his face smooth out with surprise. “You know what,” he says softly, thoughtfully. “I think you’re the first person ever to say that to me.”

In the morning, it’s not Shigaraki who brings him to All For One; it’s Compress.

Izuku awakens inside one of the villain’s marble prisons. He tries to thrash, but he can’t; Compress didn’t bother to take him off the chair before imprisoning him. There was no warning. No one even bothered waking him from his doze before it happened. Where’s Bakugou? What’s happening outside? Why is he here, again?

Before the fear can progress to panicked tears, the closed darkness vanishes and releases him into the world again. He lands on his side, borne down to the floor by the weight of the chair, and bites back a yell of pain when his wrist lands between the floor and the arm of the chair it’s secured to. He manages to wriggle it free, wincing, before the straps and buckles spring free as if of their own accord. Instinctively Izuku scrambles to his feet and faces All For One. The door behind him shuts. Compress is already gone.

“I’m curious,” All For One says mildly. “Did you honestly believe that such a rushed escape plan would actually work?

Izuku opens his mouth to reply, and manages a hoarse croak. He tries again. “It was worth it just to try.” His voice shakes. It’s possibly

because his hammering heart is sending tremors through his entire chest.

“You’re awfully quick to say that.” The mild tone takes on an edge, and Izuku finds himself stepping back. “What did you think would happen? Did you think you would get far, when two of your captors could call you back on a whim? Now you’re back, and you leave me no choice but to decide on fitting consequences. How should I reprimand you, for the lesson to stick? Or rather—who should I punish?”

Izuku thinks of Ragdoll, lying sedated in her own lonely room. He takes a chance. “You have me or Bakugou,” he says, letting his voice shake like it wants to. “I don’t care what you do to me, and if you think Bakugou scares that easy, then you’re not as smart as you think you are.” His voice cracks on the word *think*. It’s not forced. He wants to cry.

He waits for All For One to call him on his bluff, but the villain simply gives a soft *hm* and does not reply immediately. Hope lights up within Izuku’s chest. Is it possible? Does All For One not know that he knows about Ragdoll?

“Interesting,” All For One remarks. “Am I to understand that your friend Bakugou is an acceptable sacrifice to you?”

The word friend sounds sour in Izuku’s ears. Hot shame fills him, choking out the hope. That wasn’t what he meant, of course—but that was sort of what he ended up saying anyway.

He clenches his fists. He’s alone right now. One For All hasn’t gotten back to him yet, and none of the others will go near this room. He’s on his own.

“The more you hurt us,” he says. “The more All Might will hurt you when he gets here.”

All For One chuckles, and the edge in his voice sharpens like a blade against Izuku’s throat. “Is that what you’re telling yourself? Which of us are you trying to convince?”

“It’s a fact—”

“Oh come now, let’s not have any pretense,” All For One breaks in, his voice as slick and dark as oil. “I know as well as you do that his days as a hero are numbered—and perhaps his days on this earth are, as

well." Izuku's shoulders tense. "He's gotten weaker, hasn't he." All For One is smiling, and he has no eyes for it to reach. "Were I a gambling man, I would bet he was weak even before he gave you that power." He gestures vaguely at his medical equipment. "It all balances out, doesn't it? At the end of the day, what do you think he has that I do not?"

Izuku thinks for a moment.

"Hair?" he says.

He hits the wall.

There's no warning. All For One barely moves at all, except for his right arm. It moves—grows—expands—shifts and changes into a single bristling, misshapen mass that strikes Izuku like a battering ram, driving the wind from his lungs as he's slammed back into the wall.

Full Cowl comes to him unbidden as he struggles, but he might as well not even bother. Five percent is nothing to the power that All For One now wields against him. As Izuku thrashes and claws at the misshapen hand holding him, he feels the powerful digits close around his throat. With a mere tightening of his fingers, All For One stops him from breathing.

"I told you before that I respect you," All For One says, as calm as a summer day while Izuku suffocates in his grip. "But if you cannot offer me the same in return, then I must act accordingly. I have tried to be courteous, but that was a mistake, if it makes you think you have the right to treat this like a joke." Izuku kicks uselessly at the swollen arm, and All For One shakes his head in disapproval. "Courtesy costs you nothing, Midoriya."

Darkness creeps in at the edges, and Izuku goes limp and thinks, all right, he's made his point. But the grip on his throat does not loosen even then. Panic sinks back in as the darkness fills his vision, and Izuku gives one final thrash before everything goes black.

He comes to on the floor, crumpled and wheezing against the thin carpet. His throat aches, and his head is a dizzy, nauseous mess.

"Stand up, now," All For One says, chiding. "Let's try again."

Izuku stays where he is, struggling to fill his brain with oxygen again. A shape looms over him, blocking out the light, and on instinct Izuku

crawls away from it until he hits a wall.

“Oh, come now,” All For One tuts. “You merely fainted, that’s all.” He pauses, while Izuku continues to get his breath back. “I suppose that was a bit severe. If you feel too unwell to continue this conversation, I can call Mr. Compress to take you back again.”

Izuku forces himself to his feet.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees the arm retract, shrink, and become an arm once more. All For One folds his hands in his lap and gives him a pleasant smile, nodding to the righted chair. Izuku stumbles over and falls into it again.

“Are you ready to take this seriously?”

Izuku nods wordlessly.

“Good. Now—where were we? Ah, right. Your friend Bakugou, and your willingness to sacrifice him.” The smile widens. “Callousness? Or do you have that much faith in him? Or, more likely… he has done nothing to deserve your loyalty.” He pauses, considering him. “You seem like the sort who saves his loyalty for those who deserve it.

Izuku keeps silent.

“You may answer, as long as you answer seriously.”

“He’s—consistent.” It hurts to talk now. Izuku’s voice comes out as a croak. He would love to ask for water, but he can’t be sure All For One won’t think he’s being flippant again. “He’s strong. He can take it. We both can.”

“Interesting,” All For One muses. Izuku looks up at him curiously, and All For One smiles again, as if sensing his confusion. “That you believe he’s strong. You really are a child of All Might’s world, if you think that is what strength is.”

“He’s always been strong.” It’s easier just to whisper, Izuku finds. It hurts less, and his voice sounds less wobbly.

“I have watched his progress, as I have watched yours,” All For One says. “I have seen a little bit of how he treats you, and I can understand why you resent him. Would it comfort you to know that he deserves it?” Izuku looks away. “What’s more, I can tell you now that he is powerful, and destructive, but he is not strong. Would you

like to know why?"

Izuku doesn't answer.

"Would you like to know why?" All For One repeats.

"Sure—I-I mean, yes," Izuku corrects himself. All For One smiles again.

"Because the strong are those who use emotion as a catalyst to action," he explains. "Fear. Love. Hatred and anger."

Izuku coughs. "He does that. Bakugou does that."

"Ah, you speak from experience! But no. He does not." All For One shakes his head. "His anger is not a catalyst, boy, it is the sole driving force. And that—that is not strength. That is *weakness*, because it is so easily redirected and guided. He possesses a great deal of power, but he is still weak." He pauses. "But you? You're quite a different story."

Izuku stares at the floor and focuses on breathing.

"You have anger of your own," All For One says. "But yours is on a leash. It doesn't drive you; it answers to your call. You keep it cold instead of burning out of control. And that, Midoriya Izuku, is strength. It's cleverness and guile, and it should be nurtured. That part of you deserves to thrive."

All For One's tone makes Izuku look up. It's so pointed, how he says it. "It will," he says.

The villain shakes his head pityingly. "The world you long so much to live in will choke it out before it has the chance, because there are only two kinds of anger it will allow. The kind that burns brightly, or none at all."

Izuku's head hurts. One moment All For One's throttling him, and the next he's layering on the praise and life advice, and Izuku is starting to lose track of which way is up or down.

"Look at the heroes that have risen to the top. All-Might, who laughs and smiles away the fear and anger and darkness. Endeavor, who lets his rage fuel his fires. That is what your precious world holds dear: pretty lies, and rage. That is why it will never accept you the way you are. That is why it will hold up those like your friend Bakugou, who lets his temper command him with no regard for the damage it causes.

A mere thug, no more than a bully who squanders his blessings. Is that the sort of shield this world needs?"

"We're kids," Izuku whispers. "We're—we're in school, that's what it's *for*—"

"Ah," All For One says. "I see. You think he'll change."

Izuku clenches his teeth.

"You think someone like that, shaped and encouraged by the world that All-Might has created, will ever learn to control that anger. You think he'll ever understand and accept that he has to, when no one in that world has ever told him that he is wrong."

"But—"

"Do you think a mere teacher can break through that kind of arrogance?" All For One asks. "I can tell you know that it can't. And I know this because of you, boy. Because All-Might will try to change you, or has already tried to change you, and yet you sit before me, still yourself."

"He's *teaching* me," Izuku says. "I'm just—there are things I need to improve on, and he helps me—"

"He does not want you to improve," All For One says sadly. "He just wants you to be him."

Izuku's traitor brain drags him back, forces a memory on him. It's one of the days leading up to the Sports Festival, a pep talk from All-Might.

I don't have much time left as a pillar of justice . And so, as the next All-Might, the fledgling Symbol of Peace , you must use this stage to announce yourself to the world.

He hadn't thought much of it at the time. Being called 'the next All-Might' by All-Might himself.

"I do not need to see your face to know that that will never be," All For One continues. "You will never be All-Might."

"I *know* that," Izuku says, and his voice breaks in and out as he regains his power of speech. "I'm not trying to be."

"As well you shouldn't. Students are supposed to learn from their

teachers, not copy them." Warm approval seeps into All For One's voice, and in anyone else it would sound reassuring, but Izuku feels the ice beneath him thin. "But All-Might cannot see that. He only knows his way, and he can only teach his way, and because of that, he will only see it as a failure when you inevitably carve your own path. He will only see *you* as a failure. And as long as the world praises those like Bakugou, that is all anyone will see." He pauses. "I can give you a chance to change that."

Let him win, One For All had said. Izuku drags memories of pain and darkness and laughter as a closet door closes, until the tears run and the soft sobs force themselves free.

In the end, it is to his very great relief that All For One sends him back by his own power, instead of calling Compress to do the job. The black sludge deposits him back in the room, swollen-eyed and drained, and he puts up no resistance when they lock him up again.

Bakugou's eyes burn into the side of his head. His former friend is watching him closely, but Izuku can't afford to care. Better to be scrutinized by Bakugou than any of the villains.

One For All is at his side in an instant, looking troubled as he signs. *Did he hurt you?*

It's all right. Nothing bad happened.

Your throat.

Izuku gives his head a tiny shake. *I'm fine. What did you find out?*

One For All beckons, and another ghost moves forward. She's a tired-looking woman, even after death. "They keep a serum to counteract the sedatives they use," she says. "In case of an accidental overdose on a prisoner they want alive. They tried to use it on me, but I had an allergic reaction to one of the active ingredients, so…" Her voice trails off. "It's in the same room that woman is being kept in. If you can get there, I can show you."

Izuku purses his lips. Through the curtain of his hair, he watches the other villains. It's the usual crowd, plus the villain he hasn't seen much of yet, the one that they call Twice. The latter mutters to himself, or to no one in particular, and the other villains seem to regard him with mixed pity and amusement. It's a decent distraction in which to hold a finger-spelled conversation.

They'll take me to the bathroom later, he says. *I might be able to slip away, if there's a decent diversion.*

They'll be watching you carefully, One For All points out.

I won't be gone for long. Just long enough to free her, and give her time.

"What kind of distraction did you have in mind?" the woman asks.

Izuku's brow furrows. *You can mess with electronics, can't you? There has to be something nearby you can break.* He bites his lip. *Just not too close or convenient, or he might suspect that I do know what my original quirk is.*

"It won't be easy," the woman says wryly. "When it comes to touching solid things, we're pretty limited.

I've been here for a couple of days now, Izuku tells her. *Try again, and you might surprise yourself.*

One For All's face lights up, and he signs excitedly. *They've been having trouble with the power in some of these hallways,* he says. *You probably haven't noticed, since you've mostly been teleported back and forth, but the wiring is off in the main lights, and they focus both their power and their emergency power on their priority functions, like my brother's medical equipment and the doctor's… work.*

Izuku nods. That should make it easy to mess with, then—wait. *What work?* He asks.

"You didn't tell him?" the woman says, with a pointed look at One For All.

He has to focus on his own escape. Knowing about that won't help him get out faster. At least if he frees Ragdoll then she can take what she knows back to—

Izuku moves his foot. To anyone else it probably looks like a bored swing of his leg, but to One For All it feels like a kick to the shin.

I don't like being kept in the dark. He flashes a quick glare at One For All. *What work?*

The spirit looks pained. *This…* For a moment it looks like he's going to refuse him outright. *Look, this is the facility where the Noumu are made. It's a big facility. But you need to not worry about that right now, and*

focus on staying alive and making it out. I know you're very brave and very clever, but you're still a kid and you need to survive this.

Izuku grinds his teeth until his skull aches. Noumu. Tsubasa and the other ruined ghost—that locked door. Was that what they were trying to show him?

It takes a great deal of effort, but he finally manages to shove that bit of knowledge in a file for later.

It's All For One's own stupid mistake, bringing them here. All-Might and the other heroes will find them eventually. When they do, they'll bring this place down around his ears. Izuku just has to make sure they get here fast.

Katsuki has never been one for wondering. His thinking has always happened in a fairly straight line, and people who get things done by thinking a lot are the ones who aren't strong enough to get them done with a punch.

But he sees Deku now, and he sees the way the villains act around him, and he wonders.

He wonders about how quiet Deku is, with his meek complicity and his infuriatingly docile reactions to everything these shithead villains do. He wonders about how often he vanishes, apparently to chat up the shadow leader himself while all Bakugou gets to do is listen to Shigaraki's manic recruitment pitches until exploding his *own* goddamn face starts to sound appealing.

He wonders about how much quieter Deku is now than he was when he first got here. How little he fights. How sharply he watches things around him. How he offers weak little smiles to some of the villains, if they happen to talk to him.

How he won't even look in Katsuki's direction anymore.

Katsuki isn't stupid. He knows that getting hit three or more times by the same villain group within the space of a school term *isn't normal* for the top hero school of the country. He knows it can't be a coincidence that this group knew details about both the USJ trip and the forest trip when the school keeps those things under wraps. He knows they have to be getting their information somewhere.

And now, he looks at Deku and he wonders.

It seems absurd at first. Deku's a sneaky, mealy-mouthed little shit who doesn't know what's good for him, but he's never made it a secret what he wants. Nobody who wants to be a hero as bad as Deku does would ever snitch to scum like this.

But that doesn't do away with the meek little smile Deku gives that Toga bitch while she leans on his chair and chats him up.

When the possibility gets lodged in his head, Katsuki's first reaction is one of fury. If Deku's some kind of traitor, then Katsuki would be happy to string him up with his own hands. That's what he'd do to any traitor: he'd end them without a thought, no questions asked.

And yet he has questions now.

Questions like *why?*

And the answer comes from a place he wish it didn't, because questions that come to him from Aizawa's mouth make too much sense to brush aside.

People have limits. Even the kindest, most patient people have limits. They're fallible. They can be pushed too far.

His hands ache as phantom pains grip his knuckles, memories of so many punches, so many blows so casual that he's forgotten most of them. He thinks of yanked hair, careless burns from letting his quirk go wild.

He thinks of… of a closet door? *What closet door? When was that?* He's forgotten. For the life of him, he can't remember.

How you treat your allies can be the difference between having help, and being utterly alone.

Deku has never been an ally. He's been a stepping stone, or a pebble on the side of the road. Never someone to walk beside. But now he is, and now…

Now it might not even matter. Now it might be too late. Maybe it was already too late before he even got here.

And so Katsuki sits, and he seethes, and he wonders.

He sees Deku duck his head at Shigaraki instead of showing his teeth like a hero ought to do to a villain, and he wonders.

Is this my fault? Did I do this?

He has never felt so alone.

The third time Eijirou is firmly but politely escorted to a hospital waiting room since morning, one of his classmates is actually there to see a nurse ushering him out of the hallway. Eijirou doesn't quite know what he looks like at this point, but it must not be pretty if it shoves Iida into Mom Friend mode in no time flat.

(Then again, Kirishima's been drifting around here since yesterday, waiting for news about Jirou's condition, desperate to be surrounded by friends but equally desperate to keep them from seeing how wrecked he's been since the camp. Classmates have come and gone, some of them staying, some of them going home, but Iida's been a constant.)

"I'm worried about you, Kirishima-kun." Eijirou's in a chair now. When did he end up in a chair? "If you need to talk, then you don't need to hold back." There's a steadying hand on his shoulder, and that helps bring him further into the here and now.

"It's fine." Eijirou flashes a quick grin. "I wasn't injured or anything. Never even left the facility." His stomach dips and twists as he says this. *He never even left. Barely even sniffed danger while everyone else fought for their lives—*

"I wasn't talking about physical injury. Kirishima—" Iida grips his shoulder lightly, compelling him to look him in the eye. "I haven't seen you with anyone. Are you here alone? Do you need help getting home?"

"No," Eijirou says, a little too quickly. "N-no, I don't—I mean, I'm fine. Kaminari and Ashido are sitting with Jirou, and Sero's with them, and everybody else is doing their own thing and I… I mean I don't want to bring the mood down any further, but I just… I don't want to go home yet."

"Well, I'm not doing anything at the moment," Iida says. "I'd be happy to keep you company."

"Dude, no, I'll be fine, you don't have to—"

"What if I want *your* company?"

It's getting harder to smile, and Eijirou's grin is getting weaker. "I-I mean… have you checked on Uraraka, or…" He hesitates. "Or Todoroki?"

He hasn't seen much of Todoroki, and he gets the feeling that it's because Todoroki doesn't want to be seen. Uraraka's only a little better, by keeping Ashido or Yaoyorozu company, and sometimes it looks like she's barely holding it together, but at least she's showing *something*. As far as Eijirou knows, Todoroki hasn't. At all.

"They seem to be checking on each other quite frequently," Iida says. "Which I… honestly I should find it reassuring. I've been worried about Todoroki, and I've always known Uraraka to be a rock of good sense, and yet… I get the feeling they're avoiding me."

"Ah, that sucks."

They talk for a while, until Iida apparently decides Eijirou's not about to have a nervous breakdown, and then they both move on again. Eijirou makes an effort to keep his mind in the present; if he sinks to deep in thought, he's liable to end up somewhere he shouldn't be and be escorted out again. And so, he points himself in the direction of Tetsutetsu's hospital room. It's been too long since he checked up on his friend.

If he'd talked with Iida just a bit longer, or if he'd decided to visit Jirou instead, or any number of alternatives, he might never have ended up where he does. He ends up getting turned around, and in the midst of backtracking he almost barges in on Yaoyorozu while she holds a hushed conversation with Aizawa-sensei.

And that's odd, that Aizawa-sensei's here. Eijirou hasn't seen hide nor hair of heroes since they got here, and for good reason. Since the League of Villains abducted two teenagers and a pro hero, it's been all hands on deck, so what's Aizawa doing back here, talking to Yaoyorozu?

Eijirou ducks back around a corner to listen, and barely a few minutes later, he's slipping away as fast as he can.

They have a lead. They have a lead straight to the Noumu, straight to the League, straight to Midoriya and Bakugou.

And it's not a lead that the pros found, no; Yaoyorozu made it, *his classmate* made it. And that means that maybe his friends have a chance. Maybe—

Maybe *he* still has a chance.

Eijirou stops in the middle of the hallway, eyes wide.

He couldn't do anything, before. Maybe this is his chance to make up for it.

His mind races. He can't go rushing into this. Even if it weren't horrifically dangerous, there's the fact that he can't act on this without Yaoyorozu's help, and who's to say she'll help him at all?

He needs help. He can't be the only one who feels this way, can he? Ashido, Sero, and Kaminari were stuck back at the facility same as he was. They're Bakugou's friends, too. If he asked, would they come with him?

He knows for a fact that Iida's frustrated too, somewhere under all that worrying and common sense.

And Todoroki…

Todoroki would help. Kirishima's not sure why he knows that, but he does. It's as good as fact.

But Iida said that Uraraka was keeping an eye on him. Eijirou just needs to catch him at a good moment alone and—

Mid-thought, he smacks straight into Todoroki's back.

His classmate startles, and the air goes cold as he turns his right side toward Eijirou before recognizing him. Eijirou sees the brace on his wrist and almost trips over himself.

"I'm so sorry," he blurts. "I didn't bump your wrist, did I? Are you okay?"

"Fine." Todoroki's voice is tight. "Sorry, I need to go—"

"Wait!" Eijirou blurts, and grabs his shoulder without thinking. Todoroki gives him a look that makes him let go immediately. "I need to talk to you. It's important and I think you'll want to hear it."

For a moment he's sure that Todoroki's going to tell him to piss off. But then his classmate blinks, and a look of recognition creeps over his face. Carefully he turns around to face him fully, eyes flickering to the sides as if checking for eavesdroppers.

“Is this about Yaoyorozu?” he asks, and Eijirou almost chokes on the air he’s breathing.

“How did you—” he stops short. “You already know.”

“Have you talked to her?” Todoroki asks, which isn’t a ‘yes,’ but it might as well be.

“I—I mean, no, I haven’t talked to her. Yet.” It takes a little more nerve than usual to look Todoroki in the eye. “You’re frustrated, aren’t you. I can tell.” Todoroki’s eyes narrow, until Eijirou adds, “I feel the same way.”

Todoroki checks their surroundings again.

“I can’t compare myself to you,” Eijirou says, letting the volume of his voice drop. “You were out there fighting them head on, and I was stuck back in the safe zone because I was too stupid to reach the same level as the rest of you. I couldn’t help. Even when Aizawa-sensei gave us permission to fight, I couldn’t reach you guys, I couldn’t—” He grinds his teeth in frustration. “But I have a chance now. *We* have a chance now. Yaoyorozu gave the pros a lead, and that means we can still reach them. We can still do something to help.”

He’s about to say more. He’s ready to plead if he has to, because he’s desperate but he isn’t stupid and he *knows* he can’t do this alone. But then approaching footsteps make him shut his mouth, and his heart sinks with disappointment when Uraraka rounds the corner.

“Todoroki, Aizawa-sensei just left so we can try and—” She snaps to a halt the second she sees Eijirou, and when her mouth slams shut, so does the look on her face.

Todoroki turns to her. “You might as well finish that sentence, Uraraka.”

Her eyes flicker toward Eijirou. “You mean…?”

A bloom of hope stops his sinking heart in its tracks. “You too, huh?”

Uraraka’s face is set with determination. It reminds him, distantly, of the energy that surrounded her in the days leading up to the Sports Festival. But where that was all razor-sharp smiles and devil-may-care glee, this… this is stone-cold unstoppable.

He remembers that Uraraka was out there fighting, too. Eijirou only

hopes he can do them proud.

“I have one condition,” Yaoyorozu says.

And really, one condition is still a lot easier than Shouto expected. One condition is miles better than an outright ‘no’.

“Name it,” he says.

Yaoyorozu bites her lip and looks to each of their faces one by one. It’s getting on to evening, and they’re gathered outside in a hospital courtyard. It’s quiet, secluded, and free of prying eyes.

“This is a bad idea,” she says. “You know that, right? Without even taking into account how incredibly illegal this is, it’s dangerous, it’s ill-advised, and it’s most likely pointless.”

Kirishima makes a noise of protest, and Uraraka looks away, but Shouto shrugs it off. He knows, logically, that thinking they can significantly contribute to something that every major hero in the city is already working on, is arrogance. How can they possibly help when All-Might himself is spearheading the attack?

Knowing it is one thing. Stifling the voice in his head that cries *but what if* is another.

“So if we’re going to do this, we’re doing it as smart as we possibly can.” Yaoyorozu’s tone brooks no argument. She’s leveraging her Assistant Class Rep voice against them, and instinctive shame bubbles up in Shouto’s chest before he buries it down again. “We’re not going on our own. And I don’t mean just us together—I mean that wherever the tracker leads, we don’t go near it until the heroes do. And we don’t interfere unless it’s absolutely necessary.”

A muffled groan of frustration escapes Kirishima.

“If you can’t agree to that, then I’m ending this before it starts,” Yaoyorozu says. It’s not a bluff. Yaoyorozu isn’t the kind of person to make empty threats.

“Fine,” Kirishima says softly.

“Do you know when that is?” Uraraka asks.

Yaoyorozu nods, and her shoulders go from tense to squared. “Yes,” she says. “I don’t think they meant for me to know, but since I was the

one who set the tracker, I've been involved whether they like it or not. It's tomorrow night."

"That late?" It slips out before Shouto can stop it.

"They have to prepare their mission," Yaoyorozu points out. "It's a lot of moving parts."

"The League will have had them for *three days* by then." He doesn't mean to snap. He almost regrets bringing her in like this, even if they need her to pull this off. He didn't realize that waiting on the pros to make a move meant waiting an entire day.

"Well that's how it is." Yaoyorozu's tone turns harsh. "Hero work isn't just running headfirst into a fight—it takes planning and strategy, especially when there are lives on the line. *Our classmates' lives* are on the line, Todoroki, are you telling me you want them to rush it with those stakes?"

Shouto grits his teeth. Kirishima reaches for his shoulder hesitantly.

"She's right, man," he says. "Look, I don't like waiting either, but the pros can't afford to get sloppy, and neither can we." Shouto shrugs off his hand.

"Todoroki." Uraraka sounds resigned. "I'm worried about him, too. But… if we don't get this right, we could end up making things worse for him. For both of them. You know that, right?"

"I know," Shouto says tersely. "I hate it, but I know."

"So that's a yes all around." Uraraka turns back to Yaoyorozu. "No jumping the gun, no going in alone, we do this as close to above-board as we possibly can."

"It leaves us with time to get ready, right?" Kirishima points out. "Best as we can—school's holding on to all our gear, so that's out."

"And there's another problem," Uraraka adds. "Every one of us has been directly in the spotlight on national TV. We're all recognizable."

"There's a shopping district close to… to where the tracker leads," Yaoyorozu says. "There's enough distance that we probably won't attract attention, and it'll be easy to get lost in the crowds."

"We need to work out when," Shouto reminds them.

“Oh, good thinking.” Kirishima nods. “Yaoyorozu, what more can you tell us about what the pros are planning?”

“Um, well…” Yaoyorozu hesitates, looking uncomfortable. It takes a moment for Shouto to understand why.

“Not here,” he says. “We’re in public, and it’s pretty exposed out here.” He hesitates, pursing his lips. “Come on. We can talk more at my place.”

“Is that better?” Uraraka asks skeptically.

“My father hasn’t been home lately, for obvious reasons,” Shouto says with a shrug. “And it’s about as secure as we’re going to get.”

Kirishima looks eager at this. “Perks of being the number-two’s kid, huh?”

“Number two is right,” Shouto mutters as he heads back out of the courtyard.

“What’d you just say?” Kirishima calls.

“Nothing.”

The rest follow him out. “Momo, I had a thought,” Uraraka speaks up. “Going out and buying disguises costs money—do you think you could make us some stuff instead?”

“Maybe,” Yaoyorozu murmurs back. “Let’s discuss it more when we’re at Todoroki’s house—”

“You will do *no* such thing.”

Shouto freezes. Kirishima yelps in alarm and trips into his back. The girls go still.

Striding toward them from the shadows closer to the building is the very last person Shouto hoped to see. Iida looks fit to be tied.

The four of them exchange glances.

“Um,” Uraraka starts. “How long have you been listening—”

“Long enough,” Iida says coldly, halting before them. “And I’m putting a stop to this here, before the four of you make a mistake we all regret.”

Yaoyorozu lets out a harsh sigh. “Iida, we’re not—”

“It doesn’t matter!” Iida doesn’t quite raise his voice, but it feels like he’s shouting. “All of you—two nights ago any one of us could have died. Do you understand that? Three of you were in the thick of it—have you forgotten how dire this situation is?”

Kirishima seems to shrink in on himself. Shouto fights against a wave of unreasonable anger. It almost overtakes him completely—he’s spent the past two days in a numb fog, and the sudden fury burns extra-hot and extra-sharp. He tries to clench his fists, but he can only manage one of them.

“I haven’t forgotten,” he says quietly.

“You can’t possibly think any sane minds would approve of this!” Iida goes on, as if he doesn’t hear.

“You don’t have to approve,” Shouto snaps. “We don’t care if you like it or not, Iida. Just don’t get in our way.”

Iida’s eyes snap toward his. “I’m surprised at you, Todoroki,” he says coldly. “I would have thought that you, of all people, would know how foolish this was.”

Shouto almost loses his temper then and there. “Don’t push your screw-up on me,” he snaps, viciously satisfied when Iida bridles. “If you’d bothered to actually listen, you’d know that our intentions are different—”

“I don’t care about your intentions! *What* you’re doing is breaking the law and needlessly throwing yourselves into danger instead of letting the heroes handle things!”

“You’re talking like this has nothing to do with us!” Shouto retorts. “You said yourself, three of us were there—we already have a stake in this because we were involved from the beginning!”

“And you survived! We survived and we escaped, and I know you’re upset about Midoriya, but do you really think he’d want you running back into danger after you barely escaped with your life before?”

“He would do the same for any one of us,” Shouto grits out, and then he keeps going, because he is just angry and afraid enough to be cruel. “And you know that, because *he already had to*.”

Iida punches him.

The others gasp, but Shouto lets it come. He's almost glad of it; it's the most he's felt since the night of the attack.

"Iida—" Uraraka tries.

"That was low." Iida's voice shakes, his still-clenched fist shakes, every part of him shakes. "That was low and you know it."

"Was it a lie?" Shouto asks. He isn't bleeding, but his cheekbone throbs. He'll probably have a bruise there tomorrow.

"How could you use that to defend yourself?" Iida demands. "Don't you see the hypocrisy?"

Shouto finds his own hands shaking now, too. "Iida—"

"Don't you see that you're about to make the same mistake I did?" Iida's voice rises in volume. "Don't you remember how *angry* he was with me? What makes you think it'll be any different for you—" Shouto grabs a fistful of Iida's shirt—in his left hand, because his right is still splinted. Surprise registers on Iida's face as Shouto yanks him closer and grits out his answer through clenched teeth.

"*I had him, Iida.*"

Iida's eyes widen. "What—"

"I had him. I was holding on to him, when they took him. When they pulled him through that gate." Pressure builds behind his eyes, hot and stifling. "I had him. And then I let him go."

He sees Iida's eyes lower, traveling from his face to his injured hand. He sees the moment that confusion becomes dawning realization.

"Todoroki." Uraraka's voice is soft and careful at his side. "It wasn't your fault."

"Yeah, we know you, man," Kirishima adds. "If there was anything you could've done, you would have—"

"There wasn't," Shouto says. "And I didn't."

Iida's hand rests on Shouto's fist. "Think about what would have happened if you hadn't let go," he says, and his voice is full of compassion but Shouto doesn't *want* compassion, he just wants Iida to

understand. “They would have taken you too.”

“I don’t care about what would have happened,” Shouto tells him. “What did happen was that I had him, and then I let go.” The pressure in his eyes turns to burning, and he releases Iida roughly. “I *know*. I know the pros are handling it, and I know it’s just arrogance. I know there’s nothing I can do that they can’t already. But I also know that—that if they’re *not enough*…” His voice catches. “If he dies, while I sat at home and did nothing, I will regret it forever.” He looks Iida in the eye, willing him to understand. “I’m not out for revenge. I don’t want to get even. I just want to do everything I can to help my friend.” He hesitates a moment more, then goes in for the kill. “Don’t you?”

Iida looks away first.

“Iida…” Kirishima speaks up next. “It’s like you said. Only three of us were in the thick of it. I couldn’t help. And that… that doesn’t sit right with me. I want a chance to be there for my friends. For both of my friends.”

Iida’s knuckles are white. Gingerly Shouto ices the side of his face that his friend struck.

“They’re going to do it,” Yaoyorozu says. “One way or another. We might as well make sure they do it as smart as possible.”

A harsh sigh spills past Iida’s lips. “This is not a good idea. I do not approve of this.” His eyes turn to Shouto again, narrowed in disapproval. “This goes against everything I’ve learned from my own mistakes. Everything Midoriya himself helped hammer into my head. You know that.”

“If he’s angry with me for it, then at least he’ll still be alive to *be* angry,” Shouto says. “And maybe if I’m lucky, he’ll even live long enough to forgive me.”

Iida holds his gaze a moment more, then locks eyes with the others as well.

“If I try to stop you, I’ll fail,” he says. “If I go running to a pro hero about it, I’ll only distract them from their mission. If I let you go, I’ll have no way of ensuring you all don’t get yourselves or others killed.” He sighs again, short and harsh. “You really haven’t given me a choice but to come along.”

“Glad that’s settled then,” Kirishima says, forcing a smile.

Shouto rubs at his sore face as he turns away. “Can we go now? We need to discuss our strategy.”

Five is better than four is better than two is better than none.

The ghosts are clever about it.

The flickering happens throughout the day, with greater severity than Izuku has seen yet. The villains take little notice of it, for the most part. Shigaraki mutters to himself in annoyance. Toga draws Twice into a game in which they stand up and sit down each time the lights turn on and off. She sees Izuku watching, and smiles.

“Maybe if you’re good, we’ll let you play later, too!”

Izuku smiles at her weakly. He has no idea what it must look like, but it can’t be pretty.

In the evening, as Izuku is walked back from the bathroom by Twice, One For All appears and gives him a thumbs-up. The lights flicker again, and then they go dark.

Izuku’s eyes adjust easily, and so he sees the villain lunging to grab him before he can escape. He knocks Twice’s hand aside and takes off running.

The ghosts timed it well. At the moment, the nearest exits are in the opposite direction of Ragdoll’s room. The villains will make sure to cut off escape routes first, leaving him free to get to her. Their voices guide his way as he runs.

“Not that way! Toga’s coming!”

“This way, this way—you can slip past Dabi if you’re quick.”

“Hurry!”

“Take a right!”

“You can do it!”

Eventually, he reaches the familiar hallway, and—

“*Deku*.”

Izuku’s heart sinks. He looks over to where Tsubasa watches him, back

toward the turn-off that takes him to the locked door.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers. “I’ll try—later. I promise.”

The hallway is empty as he ducks into the room he’s looking for, and closes the door behind him.

Ragdoll doesn’t seem to have moved. She’s in a hospital gown, laid out limply on a cot. She’s awake, with her eyes half-open, but she barely moves as Izuku walks in. There’s only a single strap holding her there, secured over her waist. Her left forearm is exposed and covered in what look like sticking plasters.

“Over here.” The ghostly woman is with him, pointing to a drawer. “Serum’s kept in here. Don’t worry, the doc won’t be in to dose her for a while.”

Izuku wastes no time. Sure enough, there’s a sealed vial kept inside, and another drawer holds fresh hypodermic needles.

His blood runs cold. “I don’t know how to—”

“I’ll talk you through it,” the ghost says.

“How do you know all this?” he whispers.

“I used to work here,” she replies. “But then we ran short on test subjects, and… turned out I was the only one with the blood type they wanted. He didn’t mean to kill me when he did, but by then, I was happy to go.”

Step by step, she talks him through filling the syringe, before he finally approaches Ragdoll’s bedside. It’s been barely a couple minutes, but he feels like he’s been here too long. The ghosts are keeping watch outside, making sure that when he does release Ragdoll, she has a clear path to freedom.

The ghost stands behind him and places her hands over his to guide them. Ragdoll is watching him, bleary-eyed and unfocused.

“Just hang on a second,” he tells her shakily. “Hopefully I won’t screw this up.”

“Keep your hands steady,” the woman says. “I’ll do the rest.”

It’s over before Izuku’s hands start shaking, and he presses his thumb to the puncture to keep it from bleeding.

“Wasn’t as steady as I would’ve liked,” the woman says ruefully. “She’ll bruise, but the serum should kick in after half a minute.”

He undoes the restraining straps. In the end, it takes less than that for Ragdoll to shrug him off and sit up.

“What are you doing here?” she hisses. Her voice is slightly slurred, but she’s up and awake. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“Oh believe me, I know *that*.”

She pauses. “Bakugou’s here, as well. And there are…” She breaks off, lips moving. “Come on. Stay close to me, and we’ll make it out.”

He shakes his head. “I can’t. I have to go back, but *you* need to get out. If I get back to them, they might not realize I’ve freed you.”

“Not happening,” she says as she stands up. Her legs are unsteady, her cheerful face set and serious. “That’s not how it works, not when I’m the pro and you’re the injured student. If only one of us can escape, then it has to be you.”

His ears roar. “No it doesn’t!” he argues. “You *know* they’ll move us once a prisoner escapes, and you’re the one with the quirk that can find us later!”

Ragdoll’s eyes are bright and sharp with desperation and trickling fear. “At least if I stay I might be able to protect—”

“Tell me I’m wrong,” Izuku says.

“I can’t find you later if you’re killed as punishment for freeing me!”

“They won’t kill me. They want to recruit me.” Izuku stares her down, heart pounding. “Ragdoll, *please*. There’s no time.”

Her eyes shine with held-back tears of frustration. “You shouldn’t have taken this risk, kitten.” But she turns to the door. “Come on. If you’re found with me, then it’s over—”

A ghost bursts through the door, wild-eyed with alarm. “They’re coming. All of them, they’re all headed this way, I don’t know what happened but you need to get her out of here, now.”

“Go,” Izuku says. “Go, now-now-now-now.”

There must be something in his tone that convinces her, because she

throws the door open and runs out as fast as her addled state will allow. Izuku runs after her into the darkened hallway, but does not follow her further. He looks to the ghosts for cues, because if they're coming then he can find out where, and he can draw them off and give Ragdoll time. He can do this. He can save her, and in doing so maybe save himself and Bakugou.

"*Wait!*"

Izuku is spun around, and finds One For all tense and fearful before him, and Ragdoll at the nearest corner, unwittingly surrounded by desperate, wide-eyed ghosts.

"They're coming!"

"Tell her to turn back!"

"What?" Izuku blurts out, just as Ragdoll whirls back around to him. She sprints to his side and grabs him none too gently by the arm.

"Either run for an exit or get in that room and hide. They're here."

"But—"

"They warped into the next hallway," one of the ghost says. "All of them. They're heading this way and they know you're here."

"Head for an exit," Ragdoll orders. "I'll hold them off."

"But—"

"Go!" she cries, just as Twice rounds the corner at a run.

"Now, miss," he says, hands held out. "Please come quietly, I'd rather not—"

She takes him out with a haymaker to the jaw. "Go, kitten! Get out of here, now!" Toga is the next to appear, with Spinner and Magne not far behind.

Another hand grips his arm—it's the ghost woman again, pulling him away. "She's right. This is your chance to escape, and you're not likely to get another one."

Before Izuku can reply—before he can even make a decision—he's yanked off his feet. Nothing grabs him; one moment he's standing, and the next he's sailing through the air until he slams into Ragdoll's side.

The heroine grunts with the impact, and in spite of Izuku's best efforts, he can't separate himself from her.

"Good work, Magne!" Toga chirps. "I was hoping to stab her a little, though…"

"Shift over a little," Ragdoll murmurs. "Toward my back, please."

In a moment, Izuku sees what she's trying to tell him. Instead of trying to pull away, he slides over until he's pressed against her back instead of her side, letting her arms maneuver more freely. He hears a grunt of pain from Spinner shortly before Ragdoll lunges, dragging him along.

Whoosh. Thud.

The pressure releases, and he tumbles away from Ragdoll to find her slamming the handle of Spinner's weapon into Magne's stomach. The villain doubles up, retching, and a swift elbow to the back of her neck knocks her flat. Toga lunges forward with a knife in her hand, and Izuku kicks out to trip her before she can reach Ragdoll's back.

Beneath him, the floor turns black. Izuku's blood turns to ice.

"Ragdoll, get out of the portal!" he yells, just a split second too late.

The warp gate drops them all in another room, on the cold hard floor at All For One's feet.

Izuku isn't immediately sure that it's All For One beneath that heavy metal mask. But with the telltale whir and hiss of oxygen and life support, it can't be anyone else.

For a moment, it's dead quiet. The villains are quickly on their feet: Spinner, Toga, Compress, Shigaraki, Magne, and Dabi. Kurogiri stands alongside his leader, ready to bring them back if they try to run. Ragdoll's eyes are fixed on the figure before them, flickering as she sizes him up.

All For One sighs.

"Midoriya," he says. "My dear boy, I am very disappointed in you."

Ragdoll moves.

She lunges, not toward All For One, but Kurogiri. His quirk is powerful, but Ragdoll is fast, leaping on him, then slipping a syringe

from beneath her hospital gown and plunging it into his body. Spinner lunges to grab her, and Izuku tackles him away from her. Kurogiri staggers, and when Ragdoll takes him down, he doesn't get back up again.

"Compress," All For One says. Ragdoll whips around, eyes wide with alarm, and Izuku only has time for a strangled yelp before his world goes small again.

He's screaming when Compress lets him out, then imprisons him. Out, and in, again and again, each imprisonment longer than the last, until Izuku's skin crawls and bile creeps up to his throat.

His ears ring when he's let out one last time, but he can still hear Ragdoll's voice pitching through it, harsh with fury.

"*—him alone! He's only a boy, you cowards!*"

"That's enough, Compress," All For One says, "I think we've made our point with this troublesome child."

Every movement feels like a thousand pinpricks in his skin, like spider legs walking over every inch of him. For a moment, all Izuku can do is lie still and shake. He turns his head, but through the tunnel vision he can only catch flashes of things—Kurogiri, lying still on the floor. Ragdoll held back by both Dabi and Spinner, with a knife to her throat and Dabi's hand on the back of her neck. One For All crouching by him with a look of anguish on his face.

He knew, the spirit says. *He knew, and he was waiting for you, but he never said it out loud so no one overheard it. Izuku, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry —*

Tears well up in Izuku's eyes, and blinking them back only makes them fall faster.

"I'm sorry," he rasps out.

"And I wish I could forgive you so easily," All For One says sadly, as if he has any right to, as if Izuku was even talking to him. "But, Midoriya—I can't trust you anymore. You tried to convince me that you didn't know about Miss Shiretoko here. And then, you went and did this. Do you understand why you have lost my trust?"

Izuku wants to scream and curse and lash out, to spit in his stupid mutilated face that he can keep his lousy trust, but now Ragdoll's here

and he can't afford to do anything but lie on the floor and try not to cry.

The first escape attempt had barely been an attempt. Merely a trial run, if that. But this—

This is a far more pathetic failure than Izuku could have pictured.

"And because I can't trust you, I now have to eliminate certain risks," All For One continues, stepping away from Izuku. "I was going to wait. I had hoped she might prove useful as she was. But now…"

Through his blurring, waterlogged vision, Izuku sees him walk over to Ragdoll.

"*No*." The word rips from his throat, jagged and painful, and he manages to drag himself off the floor to—what? Stop him?—before arms lock around his middle, and Toga pulls him back against her chest.

"Ah-ah-ah, little Izu, you're not allowed to make us kill you yet," she whispers, her breath brushing his ear. She's stronger than she would appear, easily as strong as he is without his quirk. Compress steps closer with his hand out, and Izuku flinches back.

"Stop," his voice cracks and breaks. Ragdoll stares up at All For One with mingled confusion and anger and just a trace of fear. "All For One—please, you can't just—please don't. Don't do this."

"Clearly, I have no choice," All For One says sharply, barely turning his masked head. "You have left me no choice. Unless *you* are the risk that you would have me eliminate instead?"

For a wild moment, Izuku is about to tell him yes—absolutely, no questions asked. But Ragdoll sends him such a glare that his mouth snaps shut before he even realizes he opened it.

"You won't *touch* him," she says coldly. "If you're smart, you'll finish up with me, and you'll let those children go. You know the hell you'll bring down on yourself if you harm them." She shows all her teeth in an angry grin. "At least if you kill me, you'll only make *three* more enemies."

"It is such a shame, to destroy you this way," All For One sighs, his distorted voice tinged with amusement. "You're a clever one, to steal a sedative needle like that— I'll have to tell the good doctor to keep a

closer eye on future patients." He holds out his hand. "If it's any comfort to you… I promise not to take your life."

"*Don't!*" The scream rips its way through the air from Izuku's throat. He's crying now, tears spilling freely down his face. "Please, don't do this, I'm sorry—I won't do it again, I swear, just leave her alone, *don't take it from her, don't*—"

"Kitten." Ragdoll's voice cuts through his pleading. She locks eyes with him from across the room, the cheerful smile back on her face. "It's okay. It's okay."

"Ragdoll, I'm sorry—"

"No, I am. I wish you hadn't taken that risk, but I'm sorry I wasted the chance you tried to give me, and *it's all right*, kitten, you've been so brave—" Black vines spring forth from All For One and plunge into Ragdoll's unprotected chest. Her shocked cry of pain brands itself into his memory.

He tucks his chin in to look at the floor, but four hard, unforgiving fingers grab his head and force it upward again. "Oh no," Shigaraki hisses in his ear. "You're going to watch. This is what happens when you cross Sensei, got it?"

Whatever All For One's quirk does, it's painful. Ragdoll twitches and thrashes in Dabi and Spinner's grip, grasping at herself, but she turns her face to Izuku's and smiles brightly.

"It's okay," she says, her voice tight with pain. "It's okay. Just look at me, okay? Keep looking at me, don't look away." She grasps her side, and her knee, and the smile doesn't leave her face until she finally goes limp. Dabi lets her drop. Spinner is at least gentler about lowering her to the floor.

There's no pretense this time. Izuku cries, and it's real. He cries until his mouth is dry, until he can barely breathe and his voice is cracked and crumbled to nothing. The hands and arms gripping him are gone, and he can't even bring himself to care.

All For One grasps him by the chin and tilts his face up, until Izuku is looking up at the mask through the haze of tears.

"It's all right, my boy," he says gently. Izuku jerks his face out of All For One's grip, and the villain simply takes hold of him again. "I promise you, this is as far as I will go. I won't harm her further—I

have no more use for her dead or alive, and when all this is done, I will leave her for the authorities to find, alive and well. I promise you that." Izuku tries to pull away again, and still All For One keeps reaching for him, touching his face in a twisted parody of comfort. "But you understand why I had to do that, don't you? You must understand the consequences of your actions. I know it is a hard lesson. But it is one that you must learn."

"It's like in all the best stories," Spinner pipes up. "Like when the heroes' mom or sister or girlfriend dies, to make him fight harder. You gotta get that motivation from somewhere, right?"

Izuku draws in a shaky breath, and imagines wrapping his hands around Spinner's throat and squeezing. "Do whatever you want to me," he whispers. "I don't care anymore."

(But, in the back of his mind, he does. He doesn't want to lose his quirk—either of them. He doesn't want to be beaten or strangled or made to watch someone else be hurt. He doesn't want to go back into Compress's prison. He doesn't want—)

"No," All For One says gently, cupping his face with one hand. "I won't. It's all right, my dear boy. I won't punish you any further. I think you've had enough for one night."

And it's that moment that Izuku understands what makes All For One so dangerous, so lethally clever. Because in that moment, when he hears All For One's quiet reassurances, he can't bring himself to feel fear or dread or even anger. All he can feel is *relief*, and sickening gratitude that his captor is showing him mercy.

That's dangerous, the gratitude.

"You got so close, as well," All For One says. "I almost didn't catch you in time. You might have escaped, if you hadn't delayed." Finally he takes his hand away, and a little bit of the crawling disgust recedes. "She was right, you know. It was such a waste."

Izuku looks up, blinking back tears. "Wh-what?"

"It was such a good chance, and it went to waste. Because—what did she say to you, when you tried to rescue her? That you shouldn't have tried? That you were wrong to try?"

You shouldn't be here, Ragdoll had said. "Sh-she didn't—"

“She would have led them straight to us, if she’d escaped when she had the chance,” All For One tells him, his voice still placating and gentle. “Even if we moved, her quirk—I can sense it now. Her quirk would have let her follow us to the ends of the earth. That was your plan, wasn’t it? And it was a good, logical plan. But she hesitated, because you didn’t follow the rules and behave like a meek prisoner.” All For One’s hand comes back to rest on his shoulder. “And *that*—that is the problem that I am trying to fix. This world that holds savagery and cruel lies in high regard, and cares more for rules and regulations than people. Do you understand?”

A shaky sob cuts off Izuku’s reply. The hand on his shoulder squeezes gently.

“I said, do you understand?”

Izuku lowers his head and nods.

“…All right. Let’s get you back, then. Compress?”

Beneath All For One’s hand, Izuku stiffens.

“Ah.” All For One pauses. “You… would prefer not to go with Compress?” Izuku keeps silent, and All For One sighs lightly. “I saw, before. His quirk—it frightens you, doesn’t it.” Izuku grinds his teeth and keeps silent. “I understand. We all have our fears. But—that does not mean that we cannot get stronger. And if you accept me, Midoriya, *I will help you get stronger*. I will help you kill the fear that lies within you.” He releases Izuku’s shoulder, and steps back. “That’s enough, now. Toga and Magne will take you back. Compress, move Miss Shiretoko somewhere safe. Tomura, a word if you please.”

Izuku is hauled to his feet and dragged back into the hallway. He manages one last look at Ragdoll before Compress’s quirk makes her vanish.

The dead watch him solemnly. Their apologies and regret wash over him like water to oil. A sea of white eyes—and black, when he catches a glimpse of Tsubasa and a few other black-eyed ghosts before they vanish into the crowd.

Something tugs at his chest. Black eyes—Rei. He misses Rei. How long has it been since he last saw her?

He remembers nothing of the journey back, and only comes back into himself when he’s strapped to the chair again, and finds One For All

kneeling at his feet.

I failed you.

Izuku purses his lips. *Rei,* he answers. *Find Rei.*

One For All raises his head, frowning in confusion.

She's a little girl, Izuku explains. *Black hair and black eyes. You'll know her when you see her, but you won't want to get close, because she'll make you feel afraid if you do. She's looking for her little brother—that's what she calls me. Find her, and tell her where I am. I need her.*

One For all nods. *We can do that. That's a lot to go on. We won't fail you this time, I promise.* He stands up, and brushes Izuku's shoulder with his hand. *I'm getting you out of here alive and with your quirks intact, if I have to die a second time to do it.*

When the ghost leaves, Izuku ducks his head and doesn't think about how Bakugou is watching him. It's disconcerting, to be sure, but he doesn't think about it. He can't think about it. Not when the look on Ragdoll's face is emblazoned across his memory like that. The smile on her face, bright and pained, as she twisted and clutched at herself as if in pain. Her side, just above her right hip. One shoulder. Her knee.

Just look at me, okay? Keep looking at me, don't look away.

Izuku blinks.

It's not hope that breaks through the despair. Merely a realization.

Her side. Her shoulder. Her knee. *Look at me. Don't look away.*

Her quirk could sense physical weaknesses.

Side. Shoulder. Knee.

All For One.

As it sinks in, he wants to cry again. Even as her quirk was ripped from her, she still used it to help him. To give him *something.*

He's going to find a way to use it, if it's the last thing he does.

Chapter End Notes

CW: kidnapping/imprisonment, nonconsensual touching, claustrophobia, exposure to phobia as punishment, emotional manipulation, gaslighting/grooming, survivor's guilt, hospitals, human experimentation, failed escape attempt, quirk removal, reference to Stockholm Syndrome.

Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

(Warning for, uh, Toga. She's in this chapter a lot. Nothing too egregious, mostly just non-consensual touching.)

Chapter Notes

Got some good art!

sorrelartz

starmapp

battlereadybabe 2

scarlet-letter-mistakes

eternalglitchdraws

cricketmilk

As always, this story has a TV Tropes page!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sun is rising on the third day of the kidnapping, and Shimura Nana is aware of two things.

1. Midoriya Izuku is still alive.

2. That’s not making her any less terrified.

To be fair, the terror has a fairly concrete cause, beyond the fact that All For One’s got his slimy mitts on Izuku. The thing is, she’s been following Rei around for almost as long as Izuku and Bakugou have been gone, and her nerves are fraying at the edges.

She could break off at any time, and start her own search. But her instincts tell her that Rei is more likely to be the first to find Izuku than any other ghost on earth, and because of that Nana can’t stand to stray far. She’s too afraid of losing track of Rei, and missing her chance to find Izuku. After all, once Rei does find him, Nana can’t be sure she’ll leave his side again.

And so, she follows the thing that used to be a little girl, at a safe enough distance that the smog cloud of terror doesn't drive her out of her mind.

She needs her mind. Her body's been gone for decades, so it's practically all she has left.

They don't meet many other ghosts. The others avoid Rei, and Nana can't blame them. From time to time she longs to slip away, even if it's just to check on Toshi and come right back, but with how fast and erratic Rei is right now, Nana can't be sure she'll be able to catch up again.

At least Rei doesn't seem to mind. Over the past few days, she's pinballed between moods, from churning rage to swirling despair. The latter moments are when Nana can get close.

Take now, for instance.

They're taking a break. It's anyone's guess how long it will last before Rei gets restless and runs off again, but for now Nana sits and watches the sun rise and cradles the trembling child ghost in her lap. Rei curls up against her stomach and… weeps? It feels like weeping, but Nana can't hear any sobs or see any tears, besides the black ooze that leaks from her eyes.

"It's all right." She's lost count of how many times she's said it. "He'll be all right. He's tough. All For One's a bastard but he's never met our Izuku before." The dead child in her arms holds tight to her and quakes. "We'll find him. We haven't looked everywhere yet—"

Without warning, Rei shoots up in her arms and looks around, black eyes wide. Her lips pull back from her teeth, and her hair swirls as if it's alive.

Nana's on her feet in an instant, still holding her close. "What is it, Rei?" she asks. "Feel something?" The girl's eyes narrow. She isn't turning angry or ferocious, so it's probably nothing bad, but if it's enough to get her attention then it's worth investigating. Nana looks around, wishing that her senses were half as sharp as Rei's.

"It's you."

The voice sounds odd. Distorted, like a voice not used to being used. Nana turns around, and her spine goes ramrod-straight.

Before she met Izuku, she rarely met ghosts that she recognized. Or at least, she rarely bothered to notice other ghosts enough to recognize them. But this face is unmistakable. This is a face that she will always know. It was the first face she saw on the day she died.

"Oh," she says. "You're—*oh.*"

She remembers being just a little starstruck amid all the despair, when she met the first holder of One For All. They only talked a little before she rushed to Toshi's side and never left it.

He's here, when the one thing he told her back then was that he never leaves his brother's side. And that means—

Izuku, she signs. She hadn't been able to do that, the first time they met. *You know where he is.*

The spirit smiles, tense and worried and so very unhappy. *Is that Rei?* he asks.

Rei surges forward on her own, hair swirling. *Where is my little brother?*

Something very close to relief creeps over his face. *Come with me. He needs you.*

"Wait," Nana says, and signs it as well. "Can you tell me where he is, right now? I'll meet you there, but I have to go back first. If I can find out what the living heroes are planning, then maybe I can bring him some good news."

The spirit nods. *He needs good news, right now.* Seeing those words fills her with dread. *And… I'm sorry. I'm so sorry about Tenko. I wish I could have done something, but I didn't know how.*

"Wait-wait-wait." Nana waves her hand to stop him, and stumbles through the sign she knows. "What was that… you said Tenko? Who's Tenko?"

He blinks at her. His face goes blank with confusion, before a trace of horror steals over it. *You… don't know?*

Nana tries to ignore the icy dread creeping over her. "Don't know what?"

When he calls the boy in the next morning, the results are satisfyingly

clear.

Where once he heard shaky politeness interspersed with sparks of defiance, he now hears nothing but quiet, easy meekness. He dispenses with the hospital bed, the calculated show of weakness, so that the boy sees him up and active agin. There is little need now to lower his guard, or to play to a young would-be hero's compassionate instincts. The boy knows a fraction of what he is capable of now.

The boy's head is tilted downward in such a way that it is clear his eyes are fixed to the floor. When he reaches out, the boy doesn't jerk away again, but allows him to lift his chin upward so that their eyes meet. The boy trembles, but accepts his touch without protest.

Behind the mask, he smiles. This is progress.

When he gestures the boy toward a decent chair with no restraints, the surprise is palpable even to his imprecise vision. He can imagine weary eyes regarding the offered seat with disbelief as the boy sits—because of course he sits. He won't think of disobeying now, not with an injured shoulder, cracked ribs, a weak right hand

the other boy is better off, no broken bones but the restraints make him stiff, he's closest to Spinner who's still injured and limping from the invasion—

Focus.

"There's no need to restrain you," he says. "You're no fool, Midoriya Izuku. I think, after last night, you've learned your lesson. Perhaps now, we can move forward toward trust again."

For a moment, the boy is silent. Then—

"Why?"

The shaky little hitch in that voice, the raw vulnerability that he has been pursuing for the past two days, is music to his ears. "Why what, my dear boy?"

"Why would you trust me?" He can see the position of the boy's body, the way he huddles on the chair like he's trying to make himself smaller. "Y-you know—you've always known who I am. And, after yesterday…" The voice breaks as it trails off. He can practically taste the fear.

“My dear, dear boy, I understand why you did what you did,” he says, letting just the right amount of regret leak into his own words. “I wish you hadn’t, but I understand. You acted because you did not trust me. Because you had no reason at all to trust me. And so, I will forgive you, and be honest with you, and I hope to prove myself to you that way.” He pauses. “It was a foolish thing you did, but the thing about foolish actions is that success is what makes them brave instead.”

He hears the boy shift in his seat, though it’s too small a movement for him to see. “Is—” The boy cuts himself off, as if he’s afraid of overstepping—good. He nods his permission, and the boy hesitantly presses forward with his question. “Is she okay?”

“She is unconscious for now,” he replies. “An unfortunate side effect of my quirk, but a harmless one. She’ll awaken on her own.” That much is the truth; she’s worth more alive, either for bargaining or research, he hasn’t decided. “I will have one of my associates return her safely to the authorities as soon as we are secure—she is no danger to us, since she was not lucid long enough to learn our location. When she awakens, she will be among friends.”

“Y-you’re really…” The boy’s voice wobbles and breaks. “I-I-I don’t…” The boy stops short, muffling himself with his arm.

“It’s all right,” he says, gentle and coaxing. “It’s all right. You can finish. I won’t be angry. What’s troubling you?”

“I don’t *know*,” the boy says wretchedly. “How do I know, th-that you aren’t… that you won’t…?”

“You seem so *hesitant* to trust,” he says, shaking his head. “Are you lied to often, Midoriya?”

“I-I… I mean, it’s not…” More uncomfortable fidgeting. “I-it’s just, sometimes…”

“You’re safe here, Izuku,” he says gently. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

“I-it’s not *lying*, it’s just… sometimes, a-at school, my teachers… i-it’s just to *help* us, but I never know… I never know if they’re telling the truth, or just trying to—to motivate us, or…” The voice trails off again.

He wants to laugh. It’s all so *perfect*, it’s as if these heroes and teachers gift-wrap their children for him. He sighs harshly and shakes his head. “It’s as I said,” he says. “Lies over people. Kind lies, ‘helpful’ lies,

they're all the same in the end, aren't they? No matter how good their intentions, eventually they wear away at trust. I want no part in it. Miss Shiretoko will go free unharmed, and that is the truth. Harming her brings me no benefit, nor does lying to you about it." Which isn't quite true. He's gotten what he wanted from her, but she's been awfully useful in bending the boy to him. Better to keep her near

in the side room just off the main loading dock, still unconscious, watched over by a Noumu programmed to maim anyone or anything that approaches—the doctor is passing nearby to check on her, check her viability for experimentation just in case he changes his mind, limping on his bad leg, aching with the beginnings of osteoporosis—

Focus.

"Thank you." The boy blurts it out, and his voice shakes again with oncoming tears. "Th-thank you. For not… for not hurting her." *For not hurting me,* the boy doesn't say, though he can hear the words hovering silently behind the rest.

"I don't want to hurt you," he says. "I want to help you, if I can." The answering sniffle makes him smile fondly behind the mask. A little kindness goes a long way. Leave a man for dead, and he'll pick himself back up and fight another day. Lift a man from the dirt, salve his wounds and offer him gentle words, and he'll forget that you were the one who beat him down in the first place.

The boy is quiet for a while, shifting and fidgeting. He can sense the boy building up his nerve to speak, and he waits patiently.

"Did you mean what you said?" the boy asks softly. "About me? Being… not having a good quirk?" He hears the boy swallow. "Do you think I could've become a hero, without one?"

He smiles again behind the mask. "I cannot say for certain," he says. "It would have been entirely up to you to decide. But… yes. I do believe that. There is so much more to strength than having a powerful quirk."

To be fair, he does believe that. His own power is formidable to the point of being overwhelming, but it only became power on par with demigods in his hands and his hands alone. He likes to think that, had certain places been exchanged, very little would have changed.

His younger brother had always lacked vision.

“All-Might robbed you,” he says ruefully. “Imagine how foolish your doubters would have looked, had you conquered your dreams with only your wits and the strength in your own limbs.” He pauses. “Your friend Bakugou, for example.”

He hears the stuttered breath, the short creak as the boy startles in his chair, and smiles again. A bit of a shot in the dark, but quite a good one. School records say that they were classmates when they were small, and a boy like Bakugou Katsuki is certainly the type. A thug and a bully, as he had said before. He would be very much surprised, if the boy before him doesn’t feel a drop of satisfaction deep down to see him restrained

in a chair, battered and watched over by Spinner and Magne and Compress and Shigaraki and Dabi is returning to the room with Toga, they’ll be making preparations soon, all his pieces coming together, converging on that room while the doctor runs his experiments and follows orders known only to the two of them—

Focus, damn all!

(His ire turns briefly on the woman for what her quirk is doing to him. So much information all at once is making it more difficult to compartmentalize than it ought to be. If she weren’t so useful alive, he’d kill her just for that.)

“I don’t need eyes to see that he has done unforgivable things to you,” he says, pressing down on intrusive quirk-given knowledge until it’s quiet in the back of his head. “And I suspect he’s been praised for his brute strength. Hasn’t he?”

The boy is silent, which tells him all he needs to know.

“My faithful student is determined to recruit him. He isn’t wrong—unbridled rage of that caliber can be a powerful tool. But you? You are worth far more than a tool. You are not so easily controlled.”

“N-neither is Bakugou,” the boy says, in a burst of courage. Courage, but not defiance. “He’s not—he’s not stupid. And he can learn, he… he can change for the better.”

“No.” He shakes his head. “He cannot. Because he is, above all else, proud. To change, one must admit they are wrong. His pride will not allow that. But maybe… maybe he can be guided. By someone calmer. Cleverer.” He lets it trail off there, lets the boy draw his own conclusions.

Power over a former tormentor. It's the secret dream of every child who has ever tasted cruelty. All he has to do is dangle the prize tantalizingly close.

"I can't, he wouldn't listen to me," the boy mumbles. "He doesn't—I'm nothing to him."

"And that is precisely why you can."

He hears the boy's breath go short with excitement, sees the pulse of his heart. It's such a shame that he can't see the boy's face light up with eagerness and desperate hope. It was lovely to see in Shimura Tenko's eyes, and he's sure that it is just as gratifying in Midoriya Izuku's. He dearly misses his sight.

It is a shame, too, that he will not be able to see Yagi Toshinori's face when he comes to his student's rescue and finds the boy answering meekly at his living enemy's beck and call.

Perhaps, with a little cajoling, the boy can be compelled to describe it to him. Unlike Yagi, All For One has an excellent imagination.

The game ends—this round of it, at least—and he moves on to other matters. There are a great deal of pieces that need moving by tonight.

Izuku is getting sick of protein bars and gel pouches. But that's the easiest way to feed restrained prisoners, so that's what they get. At this point, after last night's events, he's mainly just glad that he can keep food down at all.

Bakugou has been quiet lately, and Izuku has yet to figure out whether that's a good thing or a bad thing. The villains cycle in and out so that there are at least three of them standing guard at a time. Compress is there most of the time, standing by the door. He doesn't come near Izuku, but he's still positioned in a place that makes escape impossible. One For All hasn't come back since the previous night, which is a shame because Izuku would have loved to ask him how he thought this morning's conversation with All For One went.

"Watch it, here comes the crazy one," a ghost warns. It's not very specfic, since every villain here is some flavor of crazy, but Izuku can agree that if any of them are "the crazy one," it's probably Toga Himiko.

The thought has barely crossed his mind when Toga comes up and

sticks a needle in his arm.

Izuku yelps and tries to pull away on instinct, but Toga holds his shoulders still with surprising strength.

“Don’t move! This’ll be quick!” Her fangs flash in a grin. “Hee! Don’t worry, little Izu, I’m not injecting anything. I’m doing the opposite! Just need a little blood, that’s all.”

Izuku only struggles harder, trying to jerk away or pull his arm off the needle. He has no idea what anyone would want with his blood, but he doubts that it’s anything pleasant.

Toga slaps him across the face. He kicks out at her, and in the process of dodging, she yanks the needle out.

Cold fury flashes in her eyes, blazing at him for a split second before her lips pucker into a pout. “Compress!” she calls. “Compress can you please put him in a marble again? He always goes all soft and droopy when you do it, and he makes those cute little noises too.”

Izuku goes still. She blinks at him, and her face lights up with delight.

“Never mind!” she chirps, and sticks the needle back into his arm. Izuku flinches, but doesn’t try to kick her again.

“Don’t be greedy,” she scoffs. “You’ve got plenty of blood and you’ll just make more anyway.” She pulls the needle and presses a plaster over the holes in his arm. “See? Wasn’t so bad, was it?”

Izuku presses his lips together to keep from saying something he’ll regret. Toga notices, and grabs his face hard enough that her nails dig into his cheeks. Her free hand moves to his thigh, and she slides between his knees to sit on his lap. Forcing his head back to look at her, she purses her own lips like she’s imitating the look on his face.

“Why so gwumpy?” she asks, in the same tone someone would use to talk to a toddler. “Smile! You even got what you wanted last night! See, I wanted to take her blood.” Her eyes glint, bright with madness. “I wanted to take *all* her blood. But Tomura’s sensei said I couldn’t. Know what that means, little Izu?” She gives his face a squeeze. “That means he likes you even more than me! Most people wouldn’t have stopped me from taking what I want.” She leans closer, sliding up his lap until her hip is pressed up against his stomach. “He let me take a little bit of it, though. Maybe I can go play with her friends for a little while. Doesn’t one of them have a little boy? Muscular was talking

about him." She leans in as if sharing a secret, her lips brushing at his ear. "Is he fun to play with? You'd know, right?"

Izuku sits silently and focuses on breathing and wrestling his temper down, down into the dark. He is so tired of being *touched*.

Something warm and wet trickles from his nose—she'd hit him hard enough to make it bleed again. He feels her tense up, sees her eyes widen at the sight of blood. Her thumb caresses his cheek.

"You're *really* cute when you do that." She swipes her thumb over his lips, and raises her hand to lick the blood off. "I gotta go now. I'll see you around?"

She leaves with a vial of his blood. Izuku presses his knees together and tries not to throw up.

"She's a shapeshifter," one of her pale, bloody young ghosts whispers. His name's Arai, Izuku knows. "When she drinks that, she'll be able to become you."

Izuku's knuckles turn white from gripping the chair arms.

"That's what she did with me," Arai goes on, once he can see that Izuku's listening. "She slipped into my family—I tried to warn them, but I didn't know how. She didn't stop pretending until she attacked my girlfriend and stabbed my sisters while they slept. I… I think they're alive. I haven't seen them. I'm too scared to go back and look."

Izuku's heart is in his throat. He thinks of his mother—she'll be hard to fool, he hopes, since Toga can't know about the ghosts. He thinks of All-Might and Aizawa-sensei, who don't know—Todoroki and Uraraka and Iida and all his friends. How good an actor is Toga Himiko? How eager to see him safe are they? How many warning signs can she make them overlook?

Before he can work himself up into a proper panic, the lights flicker again. To everyone else in the room, it probably doesn't look like much. But to Izuku's eyes, it heralds an arrival.

Small, thin arms wrap around his neck, and a tiny body crashes into him hard enough to rock him back a little in his seat. Dark hair billows around him, obscuring his vision.

He knows this. He knows what Rei's hugs feel like.

Izuku's eyes water.

"Help's on the way, short stack," a familiar voice calls out from beyond her. Nana's standing nearby, with One For All close behind. "The heroes are mobilizing. They're springing you kids tonight." She grins, though it looks strained. "I'll be going back and forth, checking in from time to time to bring you updates, but for now I can tell you the gist of it."

Rei pulls back. She's trembling a little, and she's looking fuzzy around the edges like she always does when she's especially scared. And she *does* look scared, from her flickering form to the look on her face.

This is a bad place, she says. *It's a bad, bad place. You shouldn't be here.*

I know. And I won't be for long, he answers. *I can get through this. I just need all the help I can get.*

One For All smiles. *And you shall have it.*

"There's been… a development."

Toshinori jerks his head up to face Tsukauchi. He hasn't shown his face much today. He learned his lesson after the disaster at the USJ, and he's determined to hoard his scant hour of combat until tonight. Tsukauchi is his main line of information in the meantime.

"What kind of development?" he asks.

Tsukauchi sighs. "They've moved. For the past few days, their location hasn't moved from this warehouse in Kamino Ward. Then, early this morning, it did."

"Where to?"

"Still in Yokohama, but further to the west. Seedy neighborhood—the exact location, as best as we can pinpoint it, is the site of an old bar that's been out of business for years, at least officially. Nowadays it's the site of the occasional drug or arms deal, but the heroes in that area have bigger fish to fry, and the city hasn't scraped together the funds to demolish it."

Toshinori shudders to think that his students might have ended up in a place like that. "Are we certain? The warehouse seems like the more likely headquarters. Is it possible that they found the tracker and sent

it off to divert us?"

"Absolutely, which is why there's been a change of plans. The operation's being split up. One squad hits the bar, the other hits the warehouse. If we get any confirmation on where the kids are, we'll still be hitting both locations, but the bulk of our forces will go to their rescue, yourself included."

Toshinori nods tersely. His friend knows him well. It's not that he doesn't trust other heroes to the job, but the sooner he sees his students alive and well, the better.

And if they aren't… so much the better that he'd be there.

Tsukauchi's phone chimes, and he checks it. His eyes widen, and Toshinori leans forward for what he knows will be news.

"We just got confirmation," Tsukauchi tells him. "Security camera was destroyed, but it managed to catch this right before." He turns his phone screen so that Toshinori can see.

It's a grainy photograph of an alley behind a dingy-looking bar. About seven figures can be seen, two of them hooded and bound as they are dragged by the others. It takes three to restrain one of them; the picture shows them frozen in the midst of kicking savagely at their captors, thrashing so violently that the hood slips back and reveals messy dark green hair and a round, freckled jaw.

Toshinori's mouth goes dry. It can't be anyone else.

"Guess you'll be taking the bar, then," Tsukauchi mutters. "Try not to do something silly, like jump the gun and head over now. Everything hinges on our diversion."

It's a good thing Toshinori knows this already, because at this point he's past listening.

"Slight change in plans," Momo says without preamble. "I'm not sure how much this will change, but we're headed for a different location in Yokohama." She holds up the tracking receiver in her hand. Ochako squints at it, but she can't make heads or tails of the readout on the screen. "According to this, they're now miles away from where they were originally, just outside of Kamino."

"Where?" Iida asks, sounding like he dreads the answer.

“I looked up the neighborhood.” Momo’s nose wrinkles with distaste. “It’s not a nice neighborhood, that’s for sure. Mostly poorly-kept apartments, dingy strip malls, and run-down bars.”

“This’ll be trickier, then,” Ochako says. “At least the warehouse was big, so we could count on having a good vantage point while… while staying out of the way.”

“Wait wait wait, are we sure about this?” Kirishima asks. “I mean, the tracker’s on the Noumu, not on Midoriya or Bakugou.”

Todoroki backs him up. “And the League has resources, we know that much. They could have multiple bases at their disposal; just because one of their number moved doesn’t mean the rest of them did.”

“It’s still worth a look, at least,” Yaoyorozu points out. “If we want to be extra-thorough, then we’ll have to visit both.” From there, they continue to adjust the plan.

It’s not all that surprising to Ochako that so much of the planning happens between Momo and Todoroki. Momo’s as good as Deku is when it comes to strategy, and after she and Todoroki teamed up for the final exams, they’re pretty comfortable with putting their heads together like that. The rest participate as well, to make suggestions and veto dangerous ideas, but the lion’s share of brainstorming happens between the first two.

On the one hand, Ochako trusts them both wholeheartedly. On the other, it doesn’t leave the rest of them with a whole lot to do except think. Not about the task ahead of them—the one they’re carrying out *tonight*—but about things that she doubts the others have considered.

“Has anyone visited their parents?” Iida asks it, while they’re gathered in Todoroki’s living room. Todoroki has a trash can pulled up, filled with ashes—they’ve been sketching out plans on paper, with Todoroki burning the ones that don’t make the cut.

“I’m sure the teachers have been in contact with them,” Ochako replies, a little uncertainly.

“Aizawa-sensei visited Bakugou’s parents and Midoriya’s mother,” Momo assures him.

“I would like to visit her,” Iida says. There’s no uncertainty about it—he says it firmly, as if he’s been mulling it over for a while. “Midoriya’s mother, I mean. To be honest, I’ve been wanting to since

we got back, but things have been… turbulent. And since last night, it's only felt more urgent. I can't explain why, I just feel like I must."

"Can't or won't?" Momo asks, and somehow manages to not sound accusing.

Iida sighs harshly. "Midoriya—helped me. I can't go into detail, but I owe him a very great deal, and—while I still don't approve of this, I would be lying if I said I didn't regret being unable to help him that night. I can't imagine what his mother must be going through, but I feel as if I owe it to Midoriya to at least check on her."

Instinctively, Ochako looks to Todoroki. He's watching Iida coolly. "Is that necessary, when we'll be doing more to help him tonight?"

"Just in case," Iida says, and no more than that.

"Well, I think it'd be good to see if she's doing okay," Ochako says. "Especially if… I mean, I've never heard Deku mention his dad. So… she's alone right now, isn't she?"

Quiet falls over the group.

"How about if you two go?" Kirishima says at length. "I mean, you two and Todoroki are the closest to him, and Todoroki's still pretty deep in planning, so…"

Ochako exchanges a glance with Iida. "I'm okay with it. I feel like I'm not doing much here, anyway." She turns back to the others. "We can be back here within the next couple hours. That should give us time to get ready."

"We won't be leaving until tonight," Todoroki says. "If something comes up, we'll let you know."

Todoroki lives in the same city as Deku, so the train ride is not a long one. But it's still quiet, and they're lucky enough to avoid attention.

"Uraraka," Iida says softly, once they're sure no one is close enough to overhear. The nearest person is a college student with headphones on, music turned up so high that Ochako can hear the lyrics. "Why are you doing this?"

"I wasn't doing anything useful, back there," she answers. "And Deku's my best friend, so it doesn't feel right not to make sure his mom's okay if she's going through this alone—at least Bakugou's

parents have each other, but—"

"No, I mean—why are you doing any of this?" Iida sounds wearily resigned. "Kirishima I understand. Todoroki I wanted to think better of, but I suppose I'm not surprised in his case either. I can even understand how they talked Yaoyorozu into it." She can feel him looking at her, but she doesn't look back. "But you? You've always been so sensible. Why do you want so badly to do this?"

Ochako can feel her insides twisting up and tangling within her, like a hundred different awful feelings thrown into a blender. For a moment she considers not answering, but it passes quickly. "I mean, first off it's because he's my friend. He's one of the best friends I've ever had and I wish I'd done more to help him back in the forest. And second…" She worries at her lip with her teeth. "How about you, Iida? I know this has to do with what happened in Hosu."

Beside her, Iida goes still.

"I mean, I've always known there was something," she goes on. "It wasn't hard to figure out. I knew there had to be some reason Deku and Todoroki were suddenly all buddy-buddy when we all got back, and when I asked Deku, he said he wasn't allowed to talk about it. Then we all heard that something happened with Stain, and the three of you were being so secretive about it, and… with you and Todoroki fighting last night, it's all sort of piling up." She balls her hands into fists in her lap. "It's so stupid, but… I felt sort of left out? Like you had this big *thing*, this big secret, just between the three of you, and I couldn't share it, not even just by hearing about it, even though we were already friends and where the heck did Todoroki come from, you know?" She shakes her head vigorously, trying to clear those ugly feelings away. "You took care of it, you didn't need help getting through it, so I decided I'd just have to be there for the next one." She kicks her feet. "And then I was, and I couldn't help enough."

It's a stupid reason, a selfish reason, just like her reason for always teaming up with Deku, or her reason for becoming a hero at all. She waits for Iida to scold her for it.

"I'm sorry, Uraraka," he says instead. "I didn't realize you felt that way."

"It's not your fault," she tells him. "It's not your fault I feel that way, and it's not your fault I didn't say anything."

The train arrives. They walk the rest of the way nearly in silence.

When Midoriya Inko opens the door, she takes one look at them before her eyes soften. It makes Ochako feel just a little less awkward about showing up, though Iida's still a little stiff as he introduces them both.

Mrs. Midoriya's smile is not a happy one, but she offers it up anyway. "Why don't you two come in?" she says, and opens the door wider for them. "I just made tea." Ochako exchanges a glance with Iida, and they reach an agreement with eye contact alone.

Ochako isn't sure what she expected of Deku's home, or if she even expected anything at all. All in all, it's pretty normal-looking. Glancing around, she catches glimpses of photographs of her friend from past years, all big eyes and fluffy hair and skinny limbs. There's soft music playing in the background, just enough to fill the silence, and the air smells strangely sweet. There's something familiar about it, but Ochako can't identify it off the top of her head.

Iida, of course, meekly follows their host and offers to help with the tea, and Ochako finds herself fascinated with details. The living room is tidy, and the kitchen is no different. Everything is neat and spotless —even the counters and appliances look recently wiped down. She sees the exhaustion on Mrs. Midoriya's face, and her heart sinks deep, deep down.

There are other things to look at, though. The fridge, for example. The fridge is covered in artwork, and Ochako finds herself smiling in spite of everything. They're all clumsy child's drawings, but she can still make them out. All-Might. Deku holding hands with a little girl, probably a childhood friend. Deku and his mom, plus the girl. A woman floating several feet off the ground. What looks like All-Might standing next to a smaller version of himself—oh no wait, that's Deku again. Ochako wonders what tiny Deku would think if he knew what his life would be like.

She looks to the next drawing, and goes still. She doesn't know who the man in this drawing is supposed to be—at least she thinks it's a man. It's hard to tell, when it looks as if tiny Deku attacked his artwork with a red crayon before he finished.

"Uraraka?" Iida's voice brings her back to the present, and she mutters an apology and follows him out.

Mrs. Midoriya offers them chairs and tea, and seats herself before them on the sofa. The wall behind them has a mirror leaned up

against it, tilted and dusty-looking. It's the only object remotely out of place in an otherwise tidy room. Mika comes in to say hello, and makes herself comfortable in Iida's lap.

"Are you two doing all right?" Mrs. Midoriya asks.

"As well as can be expected," Iida answers.

"To be honest, we sort of came to ask you that," Uraraka says. "I mean, after… we thought it'd be good if someone checked on you."

Mrs. Midoriya smiles at her. "You're very kind." She pauses, hands wrapped around her cup. For a moment her eyes seem to change focus, as if she's looking past them. Something flickers in her expression, and she looks down at her tea. "I can see why Izuku speaks so well of you."

Normally Ochako would flush with pleasure at praise. But now the thought of Deku only makes her remember their plans for tonight.

They make small talk. Mrs. Midoriya is easy to talk to. She sticks to easy topics, shallow conversation that doesn't dig too deep into the raw hurts left over from the attack. Her mood is tired, but still kindly, and slowly Ochako relaxes.

"I have hope," Mrs. Midoriya tells them. "It's not so much faith in any specific hero, just… plain hope."

"It's worth having," Iida replies. "I… I probably shouldn't tell you this, but the heroes have a good lead. And with the Symbol of Peace, their chances of success are quite high."

"I know," Mrs. Midoriya says, sighing a little.

Ochako struggles to think of something to fill the silence. Mrs. Midoriya is so worried and frightened, and there must be something she can say. Heroes are supposed to protect people's hearts, not just their lives, and what kind of hero would Ochako be if she couldn't comfort her own friend's mother?

"I know their chances are good," Mrs. Midoriya says, still looking down into her tea. "You both know it, too. So is it really necessary for you to go after them?"

The warm, comforting atmosphere turns gray and cold.

“I—” Iida splutters a little. “I’m sorry?”

Mrs. Midoriya sighs. She puts down her teacup.

“I’m not surprised,” she says. “Izuku’s just the same, after all. And I’m… I’m happy he’s found people willing to put themselves at risk, for his sake. But I know my son. I know that if anything happens to you, he’ll only blame himself.” She looks Ochako in the eye, and the disappointment and worry on her face has Ochako shrinking back, reminded sharply of her own parents.

“Mrs. Midoriya, I assure you.” Iida recovers himself quicker than Ochako does. “We are not taking *any* risks. Any unnecessary risks. We aren’t—we aren’t going to—” He’s trying to lie, Ochako realizes distantly. He’s trying to lie to her, and he’s failing.

“How—” Ochako’s voice catches. “Why do you think we’re going to do something?”

For a moment Mrs. Midoriya’s eyes slide past her again. Ochako is about to follow her gaze when Mrs. Midoriya puts her cup down with a little more force than necessary, distracting her. “I don’t think,” she says. “I know. It’s not too much of a stretch. He talks about you, you know. He loves you both dearly, and—and I wish I didn’t, but I know that wherever he is now, one of the few comforts he has is that neither of you are there with him.” She says the last part in a rush, ignoring even when her voice breaks. It takes only a moment for her to compose herself again. “He’ll come home safe. I believe that. I *have* to believe that. And the only thing keeping me from picking up a phone and letting your teacher handle this, is that it would only distract them when they should be focusing on rescuing my son, and Katsuki. So I am asking you now—please, for his sake, don’t put yourselves in danger.” Her hands tighten into fists. “He’s going to come home. Don’t risk not being there when he does.”

Ochako’s head is bowed, eyes burning with unshed tears and shame. She opens her mouth—to apologize, to reassure, she barely even knows—and the soft music in the background stops.

It doesn’t just fall silent, or wind down. It cuts off in a burst of static, painfully loud in the quiet apartment, before the sound goes dead. Ochako jumps, and puts her tea down to keep from spilling.

“I’m sorry,” Mrs. Midoriya says. “Something must be wrong with—”

The door to the kitchen bangs against the wall as if someone just

threw it open. Ochako jumps again, glancing back to see, but there's no one there.

In Iida's lap, Mika raises her head to stare at the opposite wall.

"Just—just a draft," Mrs. Midoriya tells her, but her voice is tense with worry. "It happens sometimes in this building—anyway, that's all I wanted to say, so—"

She's cut off yet again by a rattling in the window, as if the building is caught in an earthquake. Ochako looks around, confused by the noises, confused by the way the room feels colder, and her eyes fall upon the mirror against the wall.

She stares.

There are words traced in the thick coating of dust on the silvered glass. They hadn't been there when she first looked.

They're going after your son tonight.

The door slams against the wall again, and a picture frame wobbles and drops to the floor. Iida is on his feet, looking from the door to the window, though he hasn't seen the mirror like she has. "Mrs. Midoriya, are you sure everything's all right?" He looks tense and suspicious, and Ochako's a little more preoccupied with the writing on the mirror, but this is plenty alarming, too.

"It's—it's fine, don't worry." Mrs. Midoriya stands as well, and she looks alarmed too, but there's a sort of frantic guilt to it, like she expected this, or at the very least she isn't surprised.

Iida must notice it too, because he shakes his head. "Drafts don't do this, especially not with all the doors and windows closed. If there's something—" He stops talking then, cut off with a strangled gasp. Ochako turns to him, alarmed, and it hits her a split second later.

Fear. Icy-sharp and all-consuming *fear*. It's like there's a button buried deep in her brain and someone's slammed their fist on it with all their might, pumping pure terror through her veins until she can't move, can't fight it, can't *anything,* and some part of her knows this must be the work of a quirk, it *has* to be, and it must mean Mrs. Midoriya's under attack or being threatened—

"Rei." Mrs. Midoriya's voice shakes. She practically chokes it out. "*Rei.*"

Ochako feels cold.

Before her, Deku's mother draws herself up to her tallest height—which isn't much—and cries out over the sound of the window rattling and the banging door. "I know that's you, Rei!" Her voice rings out, harsh and scolding. "Stop that—young lady, you stop that *right this instant!*"

The icy hold on Ochako's chest loosens.

"You should be ashamed of yourself!" Mrs. Midoriya's voice isn't shaking now, even though the rest of her is. "What would Izuku say if he saw you behaving like this? Leave them alone!"

All at once, the fear leaves her. Dimly Ochako can hear Iida breathing harshly, Mika hissing at his feet. Her heart pounds wildly, hard enough to feel it in her ears.

And then Mrs. Midoriya is there, coaxing them to sit down again, running for more tea and pushing a freshly refilled cup into Ochako's hands, helping her hold it so the hot liquid won't slop over the sides.

"Drink, drink," she urges, letting go only when Ochako's hands aren't trembling anymore. She fusses over Iida as well. "Slow sips, now. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. You didn't—I'm sure she didn't mean it. It's all right, I promise it's all right, she's just scared, she's just—

"What was that?" Iida rasps. "Mrs. Midoriya—"

With a mental heave, Ochako shakes off the leftover fear. Mrs. Midoriya stands over them, wide-eyed and worried, and Ochako can only stare back in helpless confusion. She sips at her tea, and it only helps a little.

What just happened?

Who's Rei? What—?

What?

"Oh no." Their host's voice is soft with dread. "Oh no, I wish you hadn't—I wish you hadn't done that."

"Done *what*?" It comes out more plaintive than Ochako would like. "What did we do? I don't understand—"

Mrs. Midoriya looks back at her, then at Iida. Her eyes are wide with

alarm. The room still feels awful.

Finally, she answers. “Not you.” She lowers her hands to her sides, looks at them and then past them—*at the mirror,* Ochako realizes—and back again. “I wasn’t… I wasn’t talking to you.”

Ochako looks over her shoulder, following her gaze to the mirror.

She’s calmed down, is written beneath the first message. *Send them home before something else happens.*

“Who’s doing that?” Ochako blurts out. “Who’s—who’s writing that?” Iida’s looking too, now.

For a few seconds, Mrs. Midoriya stands motionless before them and doesn’t answer.

Then—

“Rei,” she says. “Did you find him?”

The door bangs, and they all flinch. Mrs. Midoriya sighs.

“I can’t stop them,” she says. “You know that, whoever you are. It’s a little late for that.”

Iida opens his mouth, but she holds up her hand and moves past them. A plastic bottle floats from the side table and into her hand—talcum powder, Ochako realizes. That was what she smelled, walking in. It was talcum powder.

With a few squeezes, Mrs. Midoriya re-dusts the surface of the mirror until the messages are obscured again.

“Come over here, please?” she says.

Ochako hesitates. She exchanges a look with Iida, and feels a little better that he’s just as out of his depth as she is.

When they finally get up to approach, Mrs. Midoriya turns to them. She looks… not angry. Upset. Tense. But not angry with them.

“I should stop you,” she says. She isn’t shouting or scolding, but her soft voice still twists Ochako up with guilt. “I want to stop you. But stopping you means telling the heroes, and I—I can’t risk that, not when they’re going to rescue them tonight. They can’t afford the distraction. That is the only reason, do you understand?”

“How—how do you know that?” Ochako asks. The heroes wouldn’t have told her, would they? They’re keeping things secret. Yaoyorozu only heard because she helped.

“And if I can’t stop you, then the best I can do is—is make sure you don’t go in blind.” Her fingers grip the edge of the mirror. “Ohhh, I shouldn’t do this. I shouldn’t do this.”

“Do what?” Iida asks.

“Betray my son like this.” She seems to steel herself. “Rei, what did you find?”

“Who’s—” Iida starts, but the mirror rattles, and a finger starts writing again.

KAMINO

THEY TOOK HIM HE’S IN KAMINO DON’T FOLLOW THE FAKE HE’S IN KAMINO

Ochako nearly stops breathing. The words continue forming, only now they aren’t just traced in powder but scratched into the finish.

THEY TOOK HIM THEY HURT HIM BRING HIM BACK GIVE HIM BACK

HE’S MINE NOT THEIRS MINE MINE BRING HIM BACK

“He’s still alive?” Mrs. Midoriya’s voice trembles again. “You saw him?”

LITTLE BROTHER IS ALIVE HE’S STRONG HE’S CLEVER

HE SAYS DON’T WORRY HE’S NOT ALONE

They’re running out of room, so she dusts the mirror again.

“And he’s in Kamino?” Ochako blurts out, though she has no idea who or what she’s talking to. “In the warehouse?”

I DON’T LIKE IT GET HIM OUT

“He’s… not alone?” Iida says hesitantly. “What does that mean? The villains, or…?”

MURDERERS GIVE HIM LOTS OF FRIENDS

THEY HELP HIM WE ALL HELP HIM

Underneath the words, a smiley face is slowly scratched into the glass.

“Tell him I’m waiting,” Mrs. Midoriya whispers. “Tell him I know he’ll come home no matter what.”

HE WILL

LITTLE BROTHER SAYS I LOVE YOU AND I MISS YOU AND I’M SORRY

Something knocks on the mirror. Mrs. Midoriya dusts it again. More words appear, neater and less haphazard than before.

Don’t worry about the little bean. He’s a smart kid and he’s got help.

More words come, multiple hands writing all at once.

He’ll come home alive.

He’s a good boy.

You kids watch yourselves. He’ll be mad at you if you die, and you don’t want that.

I’LL HELP HIM THEY WON’T HURT HIM ANYMORE I PROMISE

Be careful. Both of you please be careful. Take care of the others.

She powders the mirror one last time, and half a dozen hearts take form on the glass.

Iida is staring not at the mirror, but at her. Ochako follows suit, gaping openly at Deku’s mother as she watches invisible people draw hearts in the powder.

“Is… is this your quirk?” Iida asks softly. “Talking to… to…”

Mrs. Midoriya looks to him in surprise. Then her watery eyes soften a little, with something like relief. “Yes,” she says. “It is.”

“No it isn’t,” Ochako blurts out.

The others look at her.

“The drawings,” she says. “On the fridge. Deku made those, didn’t he?

He… he drew…”

Mrs. Midoriya doesn’t answer with a yes or a no.

“Ask him, when you get the chance, and maybe he’ll tell you,” she says. Not if, but when. *Make sure you’re all alive to have that chance,* she doesn’t say. But she doesn’t need to.

They walk out of the apartment as if stepping back into the real world from a dream—or a nightmare.

“Uraraka,” Iida says faintly. “What just happened?”

“I think we just talked to some ghosts,” Uraraka answers.

“Ghosts aren’t real,” Iida tells her.

She isn’t sure either of them believe that anymore.

“We have to go to Kamino,” she says. “The first location. I mean, whatever it was that just happened—that’s important. It’s the biggest hint we have. Whatever—whoever was talking, they knew about the fake-out.”

“What are we supposed to tell the others?” Iida asks her, a little helplessly. “That—that invisible ghosts told us?”

“We can tell them to check Kamino first,” she says. “And then, when we get there, we make sure we don’t leave.”

Iida sighs harshly. “This—none of this makes sense.”

“Nothing’s made sense since they took Deku and Bakugou,” she says sadly. “But—the words ‘he’s at Kamino’ do, you know? I think it’s the closest we’re gonna get to a sure thing.”

“This is a terrible idea,” Iida tells her.

“Of course it is,” she says. “But if there’s one thing Deku’s taught me, it’s that just ‘cause an idea’s terrible doesn’t mean it won’t work.”

By late evening, all five of them are on the move.

It’s a quarter to ten on the evening of the third day, and Shouta is angry.

He has been angry since the moment the League of Villains showed their faces in that forest—with himself, with the League itself, with every single bump and hurdle that has gotten between him and ensuring the safety of his students. His blood boils with concentrated rage, like caustic acid running through his veins. He's half convinced that if someone cut him, he would bleed poison.

That anger is, ironically, the only reason why he's here: standing in front of the hated press, paying lip service to newshounds who will never understand what he feels. Harsh criticism and loaded questions lash at them from the reporters, and Shouta tucks his tongue behind his teeth and lets Nedzu do the smooth talking. The principal was a natural pick for this job—smoothing ruffled feathers, planting half-truths into his answers to make it sound as if the investigation is floundering. The villains will be monitoring the media, if they're smart, and this should keep them from realizing that the heroes are on to them, and that they make their move tonight.

It should be a small price to pay for this diversion: judgmental eyes and flashing cameras and his own boiling temper.

They aren't angry with the school—not really. They just want a good story. At the end of the day the media, like most heroes, depend on a devoted audience. And it just so happens that angry viewers make for attentive viewers.

"You speak of the students' safety," one of the reporters calls out. "But, Mr. Eraserhead, you were alleged to have urged your students to fight these villains, correct? Can you explain your intentions? How is encouraging further violence conducive to their safety?"

This is what he was dreading—having to actually talk. Bowing and apologizing is simple and easily scripted. This takes effort and self control. "The full situation was unclear at the time," he answers. "I urged my students not to seek out danger, but I authorized them to fight if necessary. I made a judgment call to avoid the worst possible outcome."

"The worst possible outcome?" the reporter echoes skeptically. "Twenty-six students injured, and two captured. If that isn't the worst possible outcome, then what is?"

"That would be forty students murdered because the law forbade them from defending themselves," Shouta replies. Beside him, Sekijirou kicks him lightly under the table in warning.

“We have determined that most of the injuries were due to the gas attack, caused by one of the villain’s quirks,” Nedzu speaks up. “It is thanks to the efforts of two students, Ms. Kendou and Mr. Tetsutetsu, that the villain was subdued and later captured, and that no further injuries were sustained.”

“Of course, the safety of the students themselves is not the only concern,” the reporter presses. “But also the fact that they may lack the training and restraint expected of licensed heroes. We’ve received reports that one of the assailants in custody was—well, brutalized, to say the least. To the point of being permanently maimed and blinded. You say they were only to fight as much as necessary—to escape, presumably—and yet one of your students brutalized an attacker, potentially breaking several laws against excessive force.”

Shouta fights to keep his voice calm when all he wants to do is scream obscenities into the microphone. “The villain in question was also the man responsible for killing the Water Horse duo two years ago,” he says. “Their young son is currently in the care of the hero Mandalay, and was present during the attack. According to his testimony, the villain known as Muscular targeted him, and the student intervened to prevent the murder of a child.” He pauses. “Is there a question?”

“More of a concern,” the reporter says, looking pointedly at Shouta. “The student responsible is alleged to be Midoriya Izuku, one of the missing students. And the other is Bakugou Katsuki, who displayed wild, violent behavior throughout the Sports Festival, up to and including the awards ceremony. Both of these students have displayed violent behavior, and Bakugou Katsuki especially exhibits signs of mental instability. What if these abductions were intended to exploit this? What if these villains see these students as a recruitment opportunity?” The reporter’s eyes narrow. “On what basis do they have a future at U.A., especially after one of their classmates was expelled recently for comparatively minor transgressions?”

Shouta very nearly stops breathing. A short film plays behind his eyes, of the reporter caught in his capture weapon and slowly lowered into a tank of ravenous leeches. He dispels it with a blink and tries not to bloody his palms with his fingernails.

“Thirty-five,” he says tersely. The reporter looks confused. “Thirty-five separate complaints of misconduct, made by the female students in the heroics department—about the expelled student that you’re referring to. There are only thirteen female students in the heroics department. He displayed defiance when confronted about this

behavior, by faculty and fellow students alike, including when that behavior resulted in the injury of civilians—that incident was what led to his expulsion. Both Midoriya and Bakugou, 'comparatively', have displayed either a willingness or an outright zeal to learn and improve themselves. They are at this school because more than anything else, they want to become heroes. And they have a nonzero chance of doing so."

He pauses, brows knitted together as he wrestles to keep his temper under control. "There's a certain attitude that I've noticed recently. It came to a particular prominence after the Hero Killer Stain was brought down, and it's the most poisonous mindset that I have ever come across.

"Simply put, it's this mistaken idea that people are incapable of learning. Of *changing*."

He pauses. Sekijirou's finally stopped kicking him under the table.

"The path of a hero is a difficult one," Shouta continues. "It's physically and mentally demanding, and it invites attention from the public, both positive and negative. And in giving that attention, many forget that the students aiming for that goal are *children*. The Hero Killer tried to murder a fifteen-year-old boy out of the belief that he was in some way irreparably broken. A teenager. Anyone who has worked with teenagers is aware that they do nothing *but* change. Kids that age are constantly in flux—*people* are constantly in flux. And yet so many come to the conclusion that these kids are set in stone, and what they are today is what they always will be.

"The students in my class, including Bakugou Katsuki and Midoriya Izuku, are not heroes today. They cannot be heroes today. *That's why they're students*. They have a desire to learn, and we, as their teachers, have the ability of guide them *because* they have that desire." He takes a deep breath. He's spoken more words to the media in the past five minutes than he has in his entire career prior. "And because of that desire, I can say with every confidence that, if the League of Villains thinks either of them can be exploited, then they are sorely mistaken.

"As for whether or not Midoriya's actions against the villain Muscular were justified?" Shouta fixes the reporter with a glare and pours every drop of contempt into it that he can. "The villain is still alive. He was never in any danger of dying. He was about to beat a nine-year-old boy to death for fun. *You tell me.*"

Things are starting to kick off. It's getting late, well onto ten o'clock, when the villains gather in the room one last time.

They're setting their plan into motion, One For All tells him. *My brother will stay here. Most of the rest will be moving on to the other location as part of the decoy.*

A heavy hand falls onto his shoulder. Izuku twitches, but the one touching him is Twice. Izuku glances over his shoulder, mystified, just as the villain steps back. A figure takes form between them, gradually gaining mass and opacity until Izuku is staring at a copy of himself. The copy stares back, equally bewildered.

"Um," Izuku says intelligently, before Compress captures the doppelganger in a marble. Izuku flinches back.

"Need that, real quick," Twice tells him. "We just need one, though. To make doubly sure—doubly sure. Hey! I made a joke." He turns to glare at Bakugou. "Can't make one of him. He'd only bite me if I try." Bakugou wordlessly snarls at him. "See? See?"

"Twice," Dabi calls over. "Come on."

"It's time," Shigaraki says, and turns to grin at the prisoners. "We'll be back, soon. Just have to take care of a few things. Don't worry, though. You'll still have company. And if anything happens, she'll press the panic button and Kurogiri'll just warp some of us right back. Got it, Toga?"

"Goooot it!" Toga leans in from behind Izuku, slipping her arms over his shoulders to lock around his neck. Izuku can't tell whether it's supposed to be a hug or a chokehold. He can feel her nuzzling into his hair, and tries not to squirm. "Have fun, Tomura! Try and bring me back some blood, okay?"

"Just hold the fort." Shigaraki glares at her, eyes sliding toward Izuku, and steps closer to Kurogiri.

Kurogiri opens a warp gate, and most of the villains vanish.

Izuku takes a deep breath and tries to take stock of things, as best he can.

"They're gone." It's the woman who tried to help him free Ragdoll—she introduced herself as Dr. Hamada. "Except, considering that Kurogiri and All For One both have warping abilities, that doesn't

mean much, so watch yourself."

He's starting to trust you, One For All tells him. *Or at least he trusts his ability to manipulate you. It's one reason why you're restrained so little.*

Izuku glances down. It's true; his hands are cuffed to the arms of the chair, and there's a restraining strap around his middle, but that's about it. They've freed him of his leg restraints. If he wanted to get out, it wouldn't be hard.

Of course, then there's the panic button that Toga's currently tossing from one hand to the other. And All For One has Ragdoll's quirk, so even if they could escape without tripping any alarms, he could find them in an instant.

Further thoughts are cut off when Toga seats herself on his lap with a cheerful little hum. She's playing with a knife. "Sorry about the restraints," she chirps, poking him lightly on the nose with her fingertip. "Just a formality, that's what Tomura says." She smiles, looking sidelong at him, and her voice drops lower. "I can't wait to see you out of them."

Revulsion twists his stomach into a churning cauldron of sick, and he swallows the taste of bile. Helplessly, he looks to Dr. Hamada and Arai and One For All, and finds the latter waving for his attention. When Izuku meets his eyes, One For All points to Bakugou. *Watch out,* he says. Watch out for what?

Bakugou's watching him.

It's—it's not quite a glare. Well, it *is* a glare, or it would be a glare on any other face. But on Bakugou, it's almost blank. He's watching him, waiting, face fixed with—

suspicion.

Izuku blinks as the realization hits him. He looks at Toga, and at his restraints, and the empty room around them.

Hold the fort, Shigaraki had said. He'd looked at both Toga and Izuku.

He keeps disappearing. Vanishing to talk to their leader, and coming back unharmed. His restraints are a formality. Toga's cozying up to him. Izuku's *letting* Toga cozy up to him.

Oh, fuck.

He wonders if the other villains realize what they're doing, if even Shigaraki realizes it. He wouldn't put it past All For One to know exactly what he was doing and it would look like to someone like Bakugou.

Divide and conquer, One For All says grimly. *My brother likes that tactic. He wins fights by getting his enemies to turn on each other.*

All For One's been sowing distrust this whole time, and he's been too preoccupied with mind games and ghosts to notice what was going on with Bakugou. All For One has been getting Bakugou to be suspicious of him, to see him as a traitor and an enemy. What could possibly be better for proving his own point than that?

That's just what he needs—heroes bursting in, and Bakugou yelling to them that he's switched sides. That's all he needs—this is supposed to be the night they're rescued, so what the hell else can go wrong?

One For All grips his shoulder, making him look up again. *I think your friend's back,* he says.

Rei appears in a whirl of dark hair, and it's the closest that Izuku has come to feeling hope in the past hour. She still looks frightened and uncomfortable here, even as she rushes to his side.

Help is coming, she tells him. *Heroes are here.*

They're close. So very, very close. All he has to do is wait for help—maybe find a way to get the panic button away from Toga, if only to buy them a few minutes, even just a few seconds—

There's something else, she adds. *Friends are here too.*

...What?

Who? He tries to ask, but something rattles in the walls—faulty piping, maybe—and Rei startles like a rabbit. Her image fizzes and spurts in and out of view. Black ooze pours from her eye sockets like tears. Her fingers twist in her hair, and she cowers and curls up into a little ball before vanishing.

Izuku grinds his teeth.

Someone else is here. Friends. The only friends Rei would talk about are his friends—what friends, then? Who's here? Uraraka? Todoroki? Iida?

That could mean—

If there's any chance at all that they're here, then that could mean

All For One could find them.

He feels the fear coming, the towering ever-present wave, poised to crash down upon him and drown him in an ocean of terror. Pressure burns and throbs behind his eyes.

I have to stop this. I can't sit here. I have to act.

One For All's hand passes before his eyes. His other hand touches Izuku's shoulder.

I can keep an eye on my brother, he says. *If he makes a move, I'll tell you. Don't do anything stupid.*

Ha. Fat chance of that.

Stay with him, he says. *Don't come to tell me yourself. Send someone else. Don't leave him alone.*

One For All smiles at him, and it's almost comforting before he vanishes.

Toga is still leaning on him heavily, chatting about something he hasn't been listening to. He still doesn't listen. He's too busy knitting together the pieces of a desperate plan.

If there was ever a time to start figuring out how to bust out, it would be now. That creepy knife chick is distracted with fawning over Deku, and Deku looks like his soul just ejected from his body.

Which, well. Deku has never stopped pissing Katsuki off, even before he started playing nicey-nice with villains, but Katsuki can almost sympathize with that. Almost. It's not like he *isn't* grateful that it's not his lap she's sitting in. Maybe this'll teach Deku not to be so fucking pleasant with the bastard he's supposed to be fighting.

The problem is that his hands are restrained in such a way that it's impossible to twist them around to blow up the straps without bending them like coat hangers. And even if he could, the chick has a panic button and she's too far away for him to knock it out of her hands. If she presses that button then it'll bring the whole shitty squad of them back in, and the whole point of escaping now is that the

bastards are actually gone for once.

And it's not like he can count on Deku. Even now, he's starting to talk back. And not talk back like talk shit—he's just answering her, like they're normal people out for coffee instead of a crazy knife-swinging villain and a smarmy little shit who's *supposed* to be in hero training.

It's making him *sick*.

So, he'll wait. There's only so long he *can* wait, but he doesn't have a choice. He has to wait, and watch that panic button, and hope she's crazy enough to give him an opening somewhere.

"So! What do you like to talk about?" Toga bounces up off of Deku's lap and starts wandering around him, playing with the knife in her hands. "You've been awfully quiet. And I like that! You're really sweet! *Buuuut* it's getting kind of boring." She tests the knife tip against her finger.

Deku blinks like he's waking up. "Uh… guess it depends? I talk about different stuff with different people. Mostly hobbies, I guess." He pauses. "What do *you* like to talk about?"

"Oooh, I *love* hobbies!" Toga bounces on the balls of her feet again. "And I like talking about stuff I've done, and people I've met, and people I've *been*… but I never get to talk about that! Even here it's kind of awkward, because Dabi's a grump and Twice is nice but he's so *weird*, and Spinner likes talking about Stain but he doesn't talk about Stain the way I like to talk about Stain…"

"Must be lonely," Deku says. "Have you been making friends, at least?"

Her face lights up, and she plants her hands on the arms of his chair. "Sure have! Tomura's my friend, and Twice is my friend, and so are Magne and Spinner and Compress. Kurogiri is *kind* of too old, though. And Mustard was *so cute* and he was even my age, so I was hoping he'd be my friend, but he's gone now." She pouts. "Oh well."

"These things happen," Deku says.

Katsuki wishes, not for the first time, that he could use his quirk through his eyes. He's watching Deku's face, hating that look of stupid sympathy on it, as if what this crazy bitch is spewing is actually worth listening to.

“Say… Toga.” As Katsuki watches, something strange flickers across Deku’s face. “Are *we* friends yet?” He pauses, while the girl’s eyes widen. “Can—can I call you Himiko? Is that okay?”

The second he says that, she looks like a little kid in a candy store, eyes wide and shiny like she can hardly believe it. Either that, or she looks like she’s about to swoon. It’s fucking sickening.

She takes hold of his chin, rubs her thumb against his mouth. He’s still got blood on his face from when she smacked him before. “You’re gonna go out with me,” she says. “You’re going to be *mine*.”

Deku shrinks back and looks away. “I’m… I’m not sure you’d want that. Not if you knew…”

“Knew what?” she asks eagerly.

Deku looks up at her shyly, and—

Something’s wrong.

Katsuki isn’t sure why the thought springs to his mind, but it does. There’s something very, very wrong with how his shyness looks. Katsuki knows Deku, he’s known the little shit since they were tiny. Deku’s always been shy, and Katsuki knows that *that’s not what it’s supposed to look like*.

“I can’t tell you,” Deku says. “It’s a secret.”

“I love secrets!” Toga blurts out, rocking back on her heels in excitement. “Don’t worry! I won’t tell anyone! I promise!”

“Oh, I know you won’t,” Deku answers, eyes wide. “I trust you, Himiko-chan.” (She squeaks at this.) “It’s just…” Deku glances toward Katsuki. “*He* can’t keep a secret. He’s *awful* at it.”

Toga looks over at him, and Bakugou glares daggers in Deku’s direction.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Toga says, nodding. “He’s got a pretty big mouth.”

“Fuck you,” Katsuki blurts out, and Toga giggles.

“Yeah, he does,” Deku agrees. “So I don’t want him to hear it.”

“You could whisper it!” Toga offers. “Real soft in my ear, so he can’t

hear it. I want to hear it, you've *got* to tell me, Izu!"

"Well…" Deku hesitates for a few seconds. "Okay. But you've gotta lean in close, because I'm only gonna say it once, and I'm gonna whisper it quieter than I've ever whispered anything."

Toga nods vigorously. "Okay, got it," she says, and leans in close.

Deku moves.

It's almost too fast for Katsuki to catch. Deku strikes like a *snake*, and when he slams back into his chair, his head is tilted sideways, and his teeth are clamped down on the bridge of Toga's nose.

Katsuki sees her try to pull back. She *can't*.

A strangled cry gurgles up out of Toga's mouth. Her hand flashes out, clutching her knife, and Deku catches her wrist. Toga thrashes, trying to pull her face free, but Deku doesn't let go. If anything, he only bites down harder.

Toga tries to wail, but it's hard to make noise effectively with Deku's teeth clamped around her nose. He grips her wrist, twists and twists until he wrests the knife away. His hand flashes out, and the knife clatters to the ground at Katsuki's feet.

Deku stares at him from the other side of Toga's struggling form, wide-eyed with a silent plea for help.

"*Fuck*," Katsuki hisses, and tips his chair to the ground. He lands hard on his side, nearly knocking the wind out of himself, but from there he can shove himself around, chair and all, until he can grab the knife handle in his own teeth. Angling it down, he attacks the straps with the blade.

(Credit where credit is due—Toga Himiko takes good care of her knives.)

The strap parts, fiber by fiber, until he's stabbed through enough of it to snap the rest. He turns his sweaty palms toward the chair itself, reducing it to scrap so that the rest of the straps fall away.

It's not until he's free that Deku finally lets go. Toga reels back, face bloody and contorted with rage. She whirls around at Katsuki as he charges, yanking a second knife from her pocket. At the last moment she lashes out, scoring the blade across his collarbone—

His palm detonates close enough to her face to bloody it further and send her flying back into the wall. She hits it like a broken doll and slides down to the floor, unconscious.

For a moment, all Katsuki can hear is Deku's harsh, heaving breaths. He slumps back in the chair, breathing heavily with bloodstains around his mouth and tears gathering in his eyes. The cut across Katsuki's collarbone is a flesh wound; it stings, but it isn't dangerous.

"The button," Katsuki remembers with a jolt.

Deku sits forward again and holds up the device. "Got it. Picked it off her while she was talking."

Katsuki freezes.

The panic button is in Deku's hand. He hasn't pressed it—at least, not as far as Katsuki can tell—but that could change. It all depends on… on…

"How do I know?"

"Bakugou, I know what it looks like, but there isn't time for this—" He doesn't sound surprised or confused, or even guilty. Mostly he just sounds tired.

"How do I know you're not with them?" Bakugou clenches his fists. "You've been cozying up to them since we got here. You keep disappearing to talk to their *goddamn leader*, you're getting special treatment, they trust you enough to leave us with just one guard, you kept vanishing back at the camp, how the *hell* do I know they haven't talked you around?" He pauses. "I know how much you hate me."

Deku's eyes flash with anger. With the blood around his mouth, it's not a pretty sight. "I *don't* hate you. And even if I did, I wouldn't let someone like you make me turn traitor. You couldn't stop me from wanting to be a hero when we were five years old, K-*Kacchan*. What makes you think you're any better at it now?"

"Give me one good reason why I should trust you—"

"Oh, now *I'm* the one who has to prove myself to *you*?" Deku snaps.

"I'm not the one who's been toadying up to these bastards from the start, so why should I believe—"

"*Because I hate them*."

The words cut through Katsuki's, as caustic as acid. Deku stares him down from the chair, and he's angry, angrier than Katsuki has ever seen him before.

"They hurt me. They hurt Ragdoll—*they took her quirk* and I couldn't stop them." The anger quickly turns to tears. "I hate them and that made it easy to lie, because if I lied then they'd trust me and if they trusted me then I could hurt them, too. And it's not the only reason, and I hate that it's a reason and I wish it wasn't one, but it's there, and maybe it's the only reason you'll understand." His teary eyes blaze with fury. "Now *help me*."

And for a moment all Katsuki can say to that is, "Fine." He steps closer, knife in hand. "How the fuck did you get your hand free?"

"Broke it a little." Deku holds up his hand, showing his swelling wrist. "Slipped it out when when I bit her so I could stop her from stabbing me. It hurts, but I'll live."

"Fuck," Katsuki mutters. "All right, shove over so I can get your other one—

Deku elbows him in the chest. "Don't."

"Fuck off, Deku, stop being a baby and I'll get you free."

"*No*." Deku pushes him back. "Just—listen to me, okay? All For One, their leader, steals quirks. He stole Ragdoll's quirk, and he has another that lets him teleport people back to him. If we run, he'll catch us."

"Then we'll teleport straight to him and kick his ass, whatever, just—"

"Fucking *listen* to me, Bakugou!" Deku glares at him. "We can't kick his ass. We can't do a damn thing against him, or we're both dead. But if you leave me here, I can at least buy you time."

"What does that matter, if he can just tell where I am anyway?" Katsuki snaps. "Deku—"

"Because." Deku clenches his teeth in an angry smile. "They trust me, remember? Or at least he thinks he can use me. When you run, don't go straight for the exits. I'll tell you where they are, and you have to stall, got it? Instead of trying to escape entirely, find a way outside so you can be visible. Get caught on a security camera or something. I

can keep them talking. I can keep them from going straight after you."

It's a shitty plan. It's exactly the kind of plan Katsuki hates—the kind that means running away instead of winning.

It's the only kind of plan that has any hope of doing something useful.

"Fuck. Fuck, *fine*, goddamn it."

"One more thing," Deku says. "I need you to use your quirk on me."

Katsuki's mind goes blank. "What."

"Nowhere vital. My shoulder. My left shoulder—it's already weak from fighting back at the camp, and I'd like to have at least one good arm—"

"No," Katsuki snarls. "No, I'm not gonna fucking—are you insane, Deku?"

Anger flashes in his eyes again. "Oh great, Kacchan. *Now* you don't want to use your quirk on me, the one time I actually need you to."

"Deku," Katsuki growls.

"Great timing," Deku goes on. "What're you afraid of? It's not like the teachers are around to see—as if that ever stopped you before—"

"I don't fucking want to!"

Deku blinks at him. For the first time tonight, he does look surprised.

"I appreciate it," he says. "But tough. Now hurry up and do it, and get out."

He gets it. He can see where Deku's going with this. But…

"Fine." Katsuki raises his hand. It's shaking, even as he places it on Deku's shoulder. He's always had steady hands with his quirk before, unless he overused it. "Fine. Just… fuckin' hold still, I guess."

Izuku tries not to whimper with pain as he waits for Bakugou's footsteps to fade into the distance. He wants to wait, to give Bakugou some time to put some distance between himself and this room, or to find the heroes infiltrating the building, *something*. But if he waits too long, it'll look suspicious.

“He’s right, you know,” Arai remarks. “You’re insane.” He glances at Toga’s limp, unconscious body. “I mean, not that I’m complaining.”

“I know,” Izuku answers. “In my defense? This is probably the stupidest thing I’ve ever done.”

He presses the panic button.

Chapter End Notes

> CW: kidnapping/imprisonment, abuser POV, emotional manipulation, gaslighting/grooming, needles, nonconsensual blood drawing, nonconsensual touching, referenced past murder, victim blaming, past bullying, consensual injury.

Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

Only two arts, but they're both fantastic!

cricketmilk

biteitwhenitssoft

As always, this story has a TV Tropes page!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One For All appears mere moments after he sounds the alarm, as Izuku rummages through Toga's pockets. The spirit is all in a panic when he flickers into view, only to stop short when he sees Toga unconscious by the wall, and the button in Izuku's hand.

What did you do?

The heroes are coming and so are some of my friends maybe, Izuku answers. He's found what he was looking for among Toga's miniature arsenal of knives: two thin blades, more for piercing than slicing. He shoves both into his pockets and drags his chair back to its original spot. *Is your brother coming?*

Obviously my brother is coming! What on earth possessed you—

I'm a distraction, Izuku says. *If they focus on me instead of going immediately after him, then maybe he has time to find our rescuers. I need your help*. A dark warp gate opens within the room.

With what? One For All asks, with an expression that looks as if he dreads the answer.

The villains are coming back through. A second warp gate opens, and the masked, suited figure of All For One begins to emerge. Izuku

slumps in his seat, dragging his wounded shoulder and breathing harshly as he signs his answer.

Help me lie.

Earlier

For the sake of preserving Yaoyorozu's quirk, they throw together disguises at a Kamino thrift shop. Shouto finds a neat dress shirt and waistcoat among the racks, and a black wig to hide his hair. Uraraka's hair is tucked beneath a cap, her jacket heavy and loose-fitting enough to make her look androgynous. Even her face looks different, though she'd been that way already when they met at the train station.

("That'll be the contouring," she'd said, when Kirishima asked her how she'd managed to change the positioning of her cheekbones.

"Contouring?"

"Makeup," Yaoyorozu had explained.

"Makeup's for when you want to look pretty," Uraraka had said. "Contouring's for when you want to commit a murder and throw off the police sketches.")

They're still following the marker Yaoyorozu left on the tracking device's original location. There was some debate back and forth; Yaoyorozu was all for heading to the new location first, but after Iida and Uraraka returned from visiting Midoriya's mother, they ended up siding with him and Kirishima. They would check Kamino first, and if nothing was there, then they would head for the other.

Or go straight home, if Iida has his way.

The UA press conference is being broadcast in the streets, not far from their destination. The sight of his teachers groveling before the press sets Shouto's teeth on edge, though not as much as some of the questions from the reporters in the crowd.

"Seriously?" Uraraka hisses. "Are they really trying to make *Deku* look like the bad guy for taking down a villain?"

"What villain did he supposedly 'brutalize'?" Iida demands, looking equally incensed. "Do they not realize it was life and death?"

A memory clicks, in the back of Shouto's head. "He had blood on his

hands, when we met up," he says. "He wouldn't say what happened, just that it wasn't his."

Kirishima's teeth grind audibly. "They're makin' our classmates sound like—like violent thugs. I know Bakugou's rough around the edges and Midoriya doesn't play nice in a fight, but that's just—" His voice trails off, as if he doesn't have the words for his anger.

"Focus," Yaoyorozu reminds them. "That's not our concern for now. We know it isn't true. In fact, that journalist probably knows it, too. He's just trying to get a rise out of them." She tugs on Uraraka, stepping away from the crowd gathered before the screen. "Come on. Something tells me the heroes will be making a move soon."

"Why do you say that?" Kirishima asks, as the rest of them follow.

"The way they were answering questions about the investigation," she replies. They break away from the crowd and hurry into the quieter streets toward their destination. "Principal Nedzu made it sound as if they don't know where to look. If it were me…" Her eyes narrow. "I'd strike soon after a statement like that. If the villains see that broadcast and think they're still eluding the heroes and the police, their guard will be down."

A hush settles over the rest. They keep close together, watching their surroundings. In the dimly lit streets, the shape of a warehouse facility looms before them.

The alarm chimes softly, and he heaves a deep, deep sigh.

Unwieldy the quirk Search may be, but it is nonetheless useful for his purposes. It is far easier to pinpoint locations that he cannot see—such as no less than eighty Noumu, prepped and ready for instantaneous transport.

The alarm comes when he is focused on those eighty Noumu, forcing his mental gaze back to the room where the prisoners are kept.

The corners of his mouth turn downward. Toga is unconscious. Midoriya Izuku is injured. And Bakugou Katsuki is fleeing.

He considers bringing the errant prisoner immediately to his side, but… no need, just yet. Bakugou seems to be headed in the wrong direction, deeper into the building rather than toward the exits. If he's going to bring the boy back, he may as well bring him back to the

room he's supposed to be in.

He is forced, then, to turn his attention further from the Noumu and toward the rest of his assets. The alarm has brought back two of their number: Compress and Magne, whose quirks are most useful for recapturing prisoners. Stretching his own power to the limit, he reaches for Kurogiri's quirk and gives it a light tug.

Beside him, he can feel the doctor's gaze. "I can continue things from here," the doctor says. "I still have to finish compiling all our electronic files."

"Of course," he says. "I may send you amendments to some of your instructions. Nothing major, don't worry." A warp gate opens, and he steps back into the prisoners' holding area.

He observes the scene, as best he can without eyes. Toga is by the far wall, limp and silent. He can't tell what her injuries are—the unconsciousness smothers the rest of her physical weaknesses. Magne crouches beside her, while Compress stands over their remaining prisoner. And as for the boy…

He sees nothing, but hears much. Breath hisses in and out between clenched teeth. His left shoulder is further wounded—already weak from recent dislocation, and now burned as well. It is probably causing him no small amount of pain.

His breathing shakes as well as hisses. It sounds wet. It sounds *broken*.

"How is she?" he asks. "Not dead, I hope."

"She's hurt—bad," Magne answers. She sounds almost shaken. "Her face—it's not pretty. Some pretty extensive burns, and—hell, are those teeth marks?"

"Are they?" Compress asks. "If they are, it's probably worth mentioning the blood around the kid's mouth."

…Ah.

He turns to the boy, and steps closer.

An awful choking noise reaches his ears. It's like a broken parody of laughter, forced out through uncontrollable tears. It's an ugly sound. An *angry* sound.

That's all very interesting, especially the anger. He can work with anger. It tends to make people just a bit more malleable.

"I'm sure," he says evenly, "that there is a perfectly reasonable explanation for this. Would you care to offer it up, boy?"

He checks on Bakugou Katsuki. He's still quite a ways from the exits.

For a moment the boy only chokes out another hoarse, bitter noise. Then—"I tried," he rasps. "Tried to escape. One more time." He spits out something—though he doesn't spit it at anyone in particular. There must be blood in his mouth. "He said we could get out. He—I thought I could help him. I thought—if we—" There's no more laughter. He hears the boy's breath hitch and shudder on the way in, and then he sobs in earnest, quietly.

He's learned something interesting about people, and crying, over the years. People cry loudly when they call for help. They cry quietly when they know that no help is coming.

He lifts the boy's chin again.

"Tell me what happened."

The boy is shaking. "We were going to try. One more time. I—I helped him. I held her back so he could escape and—and he—I thought he'd get me out but he—he just—" His breath comes out in shorter gasps. He's choking on sobs, on fear, on *rage*. The anger in the boy's voice is so palpable that he can almost taste it, like blood in the water.

"He left you," he says softly.

"*He*—" The boy chokes on his own furious tears again. "He said—"

"What did he say, Izuku?"

The boy ducks his head, and this time he lets him. "He called me a traitor," he whispers harshly. "I tried to tell him he was wrong, and he didn't listen. He didn't even let me talk. A-and then, he said—he said I could either slow him down, or I could slow *you* down."

He hears Magne hiss through her teeth, imagines the pity and disgust on her face. He sighs then, and it sounds just enough like compassion that it hides the satisfaction and amusement. It's extraordinary, really. His enemies and their ilk do half his work for him.

“You were right,” Izuku sobs, angry and helpless and brought low by betrayal. “*You were right.* He just—he’ll tell everyone I turned, and—and even if I prove them wrong, I know they’ll never trust me again, I know they’ll just—they’ll *wonder,* and…”

“I said before that you were the sort of person who saves his loyalty for those who earn it,” he says, covering one of the boy’s hands with his own. “If they take the word of a bully over yours, without questioning it—if they turn against you on hearsay alone, then have they earned it?”

“N… no…” the boy says hesitantly.

“No,” he says. “They have not. And… for all that you wounded one of my subordinates, I must admit that it must have taken bravery, and no small amount of cleverness. You only made one mistake. One honest mistake of trusting the wrong person, and that… I cannot punish that.”

He reaches out, and undoes the remaining cuff. He hears the surprised little hitch in the boy’s breath. “You could have escaped yourself,” he says. “You could have broken free and run. But instead, you called for us. You called for help, of your own accord, even though you knew I might be angry. Even though you knew you had made a mistake. So now… stand up, boy, and fix it.”

“Y-you mean…”

“Find him, and teach him what happens to those who abandon their allies in times of need. You have learned many harsh lessons in your time with us. It’s your turn now—teach him a lesson in humility.”

He hears the breathing quicken, notes the quiet excitement hidden within such a tiny little sound. “A-are you sure? Even after… after everything…?”

“Show your mettle, Midoriya Izuku. The rest of us have a busy evening ahead of us.” He pauses. “I won’t give you any hints, mind you. Consider it an assessment of your skills. A new starting line.”

In the moments that follow, the world seems to hold its breath.

“Okay.” It comes out quiet, but firm. The hand beneath his slowly curls into a fist. “Okay. I’ll try your way, All For One.”

He smiles, and tries to imagine what All-Might’s face will look like,

when he sees his precious successor dancing in the palm of his hand. “My dear boy,” he says kindly. “If you like, you may call me Sensei.”

Shigaraki glances up as Magne and Compress step back through. “Any trouble?”

Compress shrugs. “It’s handled, for the most part. Didn’t even have to use my quirk for once.” He sighs. “Toga’s out of commission for a while, however. She’s… well, you’ll see later. She’s been transferred to a different location for now. Just in case things go south here.”

“There’s some good news, though,” Magne adds with a triumphant smile. “Midoriya Izuku’s one of us now.”

“Really?” Spinner taps his chin thoughtfully. “Would’ve thought we’d end up fighting him at some point. He really seems like the hero type. Stain even said—”

Behind the obscuring hand, Shigaraki’s face lights up. “Ah, what the hell does Stain know? I told you all he’d come around. It was just a matter of time.”

He turns his head, then, and looks to the clone cuffed to a chair near the bar. It’s been sitting quietly ever since they arrived, for a good reason seeing as how they gagged him. “Hey, Twice.”

“Yeah, what?”

“Your copies mimic the personality of the original, right?” Shigaraki wanders over to kick the chair lightly. The copy fidgets, but doesn’t respond otherwise.

“Yeah! It’s sorta like an AI based on the original’s brain.”

“You made this one hours ago,” Shigaraki says. “Think it’s gotten the memo that it’s supposed to be on our side?”

“How the hell should I know?” Twice snaps, mood flipping on a dime. “Not like it matters. These things are fragile. Too much damage and they fall apart anyway.”

“We should probably move it away from the entrance, then,” Dabi remarks. “We wouldn’t want to give the game away too quickly.”

Magne’s hand is on the back of the chair, ready to yank it and their decoy prisoner behind the bar, when the door—and the wall

surrounding it—erupts inward. The villains nearest to it are sent tumbling back with the force of the explosion.

“Apologies,” All-Might says, smile stretched into an angry grimace. “But I’ve been told it’s polite to knock first.”

“I cannot believe that worked,” Arai says, for at least the fifth time.

“Two reasons why it did,” Izuku says under his breath. “One, I had his brother coaching me.”

“Yeah, that probably helped some,” Arai says dryly.

One For All is no longer with him; he’s sticking close to All For One’s side, ready to send word through the other dead if anything changes. The halls are crowded; Izuku has to weave between them as he hurries through. It won’t take long for a message to reach him, if need be.

He’s clear for now, armed with two stolen knives and a pair of cuffs he took from his own chair.

“The other reason’s his new quirk,” Izuku goes on. “He steals them, but he can’t be an instant expert, and Ragdoll—” His voice catches. It still hurts to think about her. “She told me about her quirk. It’s tricky, having so much information pour into your head at once. Either he’ll be overwhelmed by it and miss what’s right in front of his nose, or he’ll force himself to focus on a few things and miss a lot of the rest.” A grim smile twitches at the corners of his mouth. “He’s like how I used to be—either he has it all the way on or all the way off. No in-between.”

“Nice,” Arai says appreciatively. “So, what’re you doing now? Escaping?”

“Too risky. I can’t tell if he’s paying attention to me or not, so it’s better if I stay in the building. Besides, there are—”

He stops then, because there are arms latching onto him, dragging back and forcing him to halt. He knows who it is before he even turns, because it’s far from the first time she’s ever done this.

Rei hugs his arm, peeking out from beneath her hair with a single wide, jet-black eye.

“Hi, Rei,” he says, and manages a strained smile at her. “Things are

pretty tense right now, huh."

She pulls at him, trying to drag him in the opposite direction he's headed.

"Rei—"

Not that way, she says. *Out is the other way.*

"I know," he says. "But I can't go out yet. There's something I have to do first, and I don't know if—"

In the distance, something explodes. The lights flicker as Izuku whips around, every nerve on edge.

"Half-pint, where do you think you're going?" Izuku sighs heavily as Nana appears in the hallway, then blinks closer until she reaches his side. "Good, she found you. C'mon, kid, the heroes are here and if there was ever a time to get moving, it's now."

"The heroes?"

"Some of them, at least," she says. "What you just heard is Mount Lady smashing through the gate. You can go now."

"I can't yet," Izuku says, forcing down his frustration. "I—there's something I need to look for. I-I need to see, it's… I can't leave without seeing for myself."

Nana sighs, frustrated. "No. Absolutely not. For once in your life, Izuku, you need to turn around and run away, got it? Whatever this is, it's not worth your—" She stops short, eyes narrowing. "Where's everyone going?"

The ghosts are filtering out of the hallway—even Arai is gone, without even a word. There's a tension in the air that Izuku wouldn't have detected over his own.

Rei hisses.

Izuku's first, terrifying thought is that All For One is coming to check on his progress. But if that were the case, then One For All would have warned him. There's no time for him to form a second thought, because his answer comes as if summoned.

Tsubasa stands at the end of the hallway, all dead eyes and mangled wings. As Izuku watches, more figures join him. They vary wildly in

age, gender, body type, but they all have one thing in common: black eyes, empty voids that seem to draw in the light around them.

"*Deku?*" Tsubasa calls.

Rei drags at his arm, her grip icy and painful.

"Something's wrong, Ms. Nana," Izuku whispers. "I just—I just have to see. I'll be right back. Keep an eye on All-Might for me, okay?"

"Izuku—"

Heedless of Nana and Rei's protests, Izuku pushes on. He knows these hallways by now.

The small anteroom is very crowded now, with more spirits pressed in than should reasonably fit. It brings uncomfortably familiar feelings into the pit of Izuku's stomach, but he forces them down and steps up to the locked door. He draws his stolen knives from their hiding place.

With a swipe, Rei knocks them out of his hands and pushes him back.

"Rei!" he splutters.

Go back, she says. *Go back. Don't go through. Get out, get out, get out.*

"Rei, will you just let me—"

It's a bad place! Her arms move in forceful jerks. Her form flickers and blinks until it hurts just to keep looking at her. *It's bad! Get out! Don't go in!*

"*Deku*," Tsubasa pleads. "*Deku. Help me.*"

Shut up! Rei hisses, lunging at him until Tsubasa flickers back. *Shut up! Shut up! Leave him alone!*

Izuku holds his breath and forces past, retrieving his dropped knives. The lock is not a complicated one; at this point, this deep into All For One's stronghold, security is not the largest priority. It comes undone, and Izuku pockets the knives again, just in case.

He opens the door, and Rei *shrieks*.

"Just a hallway," he murmurs, though he's less and less sure of that the further he goes. "Just another hallway. I'll just take a quick look, Rei, that's all—"

Rei clings to him. She's trembling, gripping him hard enough to be painful. She's staring ahead, into the dimly-lit hallway beyond the open door.

"Rei, what's wrong?" he murmurs, his voice thin in the quiet. "Do you —?"

She flies.

Not back—not away from the hallway. When she flits away from his side, she goes further in, until he barely catches her swirl of dark hair as it vanishes around the first corner.
"What—Rei?"

Time is of the essence. Ahead of him is Rei, his oldest and best friend, and some unknown horror that frightens even her. Behind him are Tsubasa, someone he knew even before he met her, and a crowd of silent, black-eyed ghosts.

Something tugs at the back of his mind—that that's important somehow, the black eyes—but he's far too focused on the choice before him. And really, it isn't much of a choice at all.

When Izuku takes off running, it's forward.

The alley behind the warehouse is cramped, but at least it's out of the way. It's out of sight.

"See anything?" Uraraka asks.

She has Iida by the ankles, holding on to him like a helium balloon while he floats level with the high window. Shouto stands on Kirishima's shoulders, gripping the window ledge to pull himself up and see.

It takes a moment to make sense of what he's looking at.

It's a vast warehouse space, all wide walls and high ceilings, metal catwalks and at least one mezzanine overlooking the machinery that fills the space. It's almost factory-like in its setup, except instead of objects being manufactured, it's…

Beside him, Iida draws in a sharp breath. Shouto feels his stomach twist in horror and disgust, and climbs down from Kirishima's shoulders. He's seen enough. He doesn't need to see any more.

“Well,” he says, fighting down the bile crawling up his throat. “Now we know why the Noumu’s tracker came here first.”

“Why?” Yaoyorozu asks. “What did you see?”

“This isn’t their headquarters,” Shouto grits out through clenched teeth. “I doubt it’s even where they’re holding them—it’s a facility for making those *things*.”

Uraraka gasps sharply. “Iida?” she calls up. “Iida, I’m gonna bring you back down, okay?”

“Yes, thank you, Uraraka. I think I’ve seen enough.”

A crash and explosion peals out from near the front entrance they had passed before.

“That’ll be the heroes,” Yaoyorozu grits out. “We’re too closed in here—we need to move positions.”

“Back around to the side, then,” Iida says, as Uraraka pulls him back to the ground and releases her quirk. “Come along, hurry.”

They make their way slowly around the side of the facility, until they’re just within view of the front entrance. It’s been blown inward; the main doors and most of the wall are smashed in, surrounded by what looks like the remains of a truck. Shouto only hopes there was no one in the cab when it hit.

“They got in,” Yaoyorozu murmurs. “The heroes are inside, and so is Midoriya. Bakugou too, most likely.” She turns to the others, eyes bright with the first sparks of hope. “I think—I think it might be okay. I think they have this.”

Shouto cocks his head, trying to listen. They’ve moved away from the side of the building, behind a free-standing stone wall toward the front. But he can still hear their voices, calling to each other from within the building.

“Jeanist!” This voice he recognizes. That’s Tiger. “Jeanist, Mount Lady, I’ve found her!””

“Ragdoll?” Mount Lady’s voice is much easier to hear. “Is she alive?”

“She’s unconscious. But she has a pulse, thank heaven.”

“This place is more complicated than we first thought,” another voice

says. Shouto doesn't recognize it, but it could be Best Jeanist. "Searching every room and hallway could take more time than expected."

It sounds, at least to Shouto's ears, like an opportunity to slip in and do some searching on their own. A hand descends on his shoulder—it's Iida, keeping him from making a premature move. Shouto turns to glare at him, ready to fire back at the wordless warning.

"Uh, guys?" Kirishima says quietly. "One of the side doors just opened."

Shouto turns his head, alarmed. Sure enough, a small doorway on the side of the building—one they just passed minutes ago— is swinging open silently. Someone emerges, and his heart seizes. Are they far enough away?

Uraraka gasps. Shouto gapes.

Bakugou comes creeping out of the building, sidling along the outer wall as he checks his peripherals. For a moment, Shouto is too shocked to react.

Luckily, Kirishima isn't. In an instant he's yanking off the false horns and poking his head out from cover. "Bakugou!" he hisses, waving to him. "Bakugou, over here!"

Their classmate is among them in seconds, diving behind their cover and whisper-shouting with muffled fury. "*What the fuck are you idiots doing here?*"

"*We're here for you and Deku, obviously!*" Uraraka whisper-shouts back. "Where is he?"

"Are you okay?" Kirishima asks. "You're bleeding!"

Sure enough, there's a gash over his collarbone, but it doesn't look too serious. Scowling, Bakugou tugs his bloodstained shirt to cover it.

"It's fucking nothing, shut up," he growls. "Deku's still in there. He pulled off some half-cocked plan to buy time while I got out."

"And you left him?" Shouto asks.

"I wasn't my goddamn idea!" he grits out at him. "What the fuck do *you* idiots think you can do here?"

“The heroes are launching a raid to rescue you and Midoriya,” Yaoyorozu tells him. “Best Jeanist, Tiger, and Mount Lady are in there now.”

Bakugou’s eyes widen. “Fuck—is that all? The way Deku was talking, they’re probably gonna need more than *that*.”

Shouto’s blood runs cold. That’s the closest he’s ever seen Bakugou to being rattled.

“Why do you say that?” Iida asks.

“Look, they have this bastard shadow leader, all right? Called ‘All For One’ or some shit. Deku says he steals quirks.”

“That’s impossible.” Yaoyorozu sounds shaken. “There’s—there’s never been any quirk like that except in stories—”

The air changes.

Shouto can’t explain it. He knows what a change in temperature feels like, and this isn’t it. But just for a moment, he swears he can feel a chill in the air that isn’t his. He looks to the others, and sees his own confusion and alarm reflected in their eyes.

“Got a bad feeling,” Kirishima says tightly. “Anybody else feeling it?”

“No shit,” Bakugou mutters.

“I can’t tell if this is intuition,” Yaoyorozu says. “Or the effects of a quirk.”

“We shouldn’t be here,” Iida murmurs. “We should—” Uraraka claps her hand over his mouth.

Footsteps.

Logically, footsteps shouldn’t be loud enough for them to hear an individual set, all the way out here. And yet, they reach Shouto’s ears, slow and purposeful, before a voice rings out like a tolling funeral bell.

“Welcome, heroes.”

They’re too close, far too close, but Shouto turns and looks anyway. The angle is bad, but they can see the blown-open front, and the raiding party of heroes gathered inside. And beyond them…

A lone figure stands there, just out of reach of where light would touch. Shouto can barely see him, but he can just make out a dark, crisply-fitted suit, and a heavy, jet-black metal mask fitted over his head.

“Who is that?” he hears Uraraka whisper.

“One villain against multiple heroes?” Kirishima murmurs. “Seems pretty one-sided to me.”

As the five of them watch, the lone villain moves to strike.

And the battle is indeed one-sided, but in entirely the wrong direction.

For a few good moments, Izuku can only stand and stare.

There are so few ghosts here. None, actually—the only ones who linger are the strange, silent black-eyed ones he now knows to be former Noumu.

Which sort of makes sense, now that he thinks of it. The only living people in here are Noumu, as well.

That’s what freezes him first: the presence of countless Noumu, all clustered into a single space. The panic subsides when he sees that they’re enclosed in glass pods, hooked up to wires and tubes, and unresponsive. They’re packed into the vast space, like sardines in a can: dozens of the creatures that Izuku has never seen fall to anything less than a top-ranked hero.

As he watches, blackness swirls around the nearest one. And then the next, and the next. It spreads over every Noumu he can see, and Izuku recognizes it. It’s the same tar-like blackness that has been used to transport him back and forth over the past few days.

It spreads, overtaking each artificial human weapon. In a matter of seconds, the Noumu vanish.

They give the villains no time to react. Edgeshot moves swiftly, disabling the warp gate villain before he can give them an escape route. The rest of the frontline heroes move in to take down the rest.

All-Might only has eyes for the boy sitting cuffed to a chair toward the back of the room. Green eyes stare back at him over the gag, and his student strains against the bonds.

The villain known as Dabi gets a drop on them, sending out a wall of fire to drive them back. In such an enclosed space, All-Might cannot risk dispelling it with wind pressure. Even a millimeter off, and he could send the entire building up in flames with them inside of it.

And at the moment, he isn't sure that he can trust his precision.

But every quirk has limits, and even Dabi is aware of the risks. When the flames subside, Gran Torino is upon him, knocking him to the ground before he can try it again. The villains put up a fight, but they've been taken off guard. The battle will not last long; it's only a matter of time before every one of them is subdued.

Only—

All-Might halts, scanning the room. He can see Izuku on the other side of the villains, seconds away from rescue. Where is Bakugou? Is he being kept in a back room? It would certainly make sense, given his penchant for explosive noise—

A familiar burst of raw power rattles the entire room, and an explosion of wind pressure ripples out into the midst of the battle. All-Might lunges forward, scattering struggling villains before him in a determined effort to reach his student.

Izuku is on his feet, having blasted his own hands free with a burst of One For All at 100%—Recovery Girl won't be happy with that—

The boy rips the gag out of his mouth and pitches his voice above everyone else.

"*It's a trap!*"

All-Might reaches him, blood running cold. "Izuku—"

Izuku thrusts one of his broken hands out at him, except—it's not broken. It's melting, like candle wax in a furnace.

Green eyes meet his, furious and frantic. "I'm not real!" Izuku yells. "I'm just a copy made by Twice's quirk! Bakugou and I are at the warehouse in Kamino! *Hurry!*"

His entire form dissolves into nothing.

"Damn."

All-Might whips around, fury mounting, to find the villains subdued

and forced to the floor. Kurogiri is unconscious, making their escape impossible, but Shigaraki Tomura is still grinning. “Guess it didn’t get the memo after all.” Blackness begins to gather around the downed villains, creeping over them like living sludge. Shigaraki’s smile widens. “Have fun.”

The villains disappear into the blackness, just seconds before shouts of alarm reach their ears. All-Might exchanges a single glance with Gran Torino, then rushes back outside.

The police is out in force around the building, along with more heroes headed by Endeavor. Minutes ago, All-Might left them standing at the ready, in case backup was needed.

They’re surrounded now. The entire area is swarming with Noumu.

He reaches Endeavor first, right as the Flame Hero finishes dispatching an artificial human that lunged too close. “Clones,” he says, fighting against his own rage. “They used clones to draw us here. The captive students are at the other facility.”

“Typical,” Endeavor spits, face twisted into a mask of disgust. “Get out of the way, then. I’ll clean up this mess.”

All-Might needs no second urging. With a leap and a bound, he’s hurrying toward the other strike location with all the speed that he can muster.

Izuku staggers through the empty warehouse on unsteady, stumbling legs. “R-Rei?” he calls. “Rei, where are you?”

He looks back. The only ghosts still with him are Tsubasa and the rest. They’re following him now, watching him as if waiting. For what, Izuku doesn’t know.

“I-I don’t understand,” he says softly. “Is this—was that it? Was that what you wanted me to see?”

They continue to watch him. Tsubasa drifts closer, in and out of Izuku’s vision. He brushes an empty pod with pale fingertips.

“Tsubasa-kun,” he says. “What is it? What do you want from me?”

Tsubasa looks up at him. “*Jii-chan.*”

Izuku jumps. “What—your grandfather? Do you want me to tell your

grandfather something?" Cold dread fills him. "Do you want me to tell him what happened to you?"

"*Jii-chan.*" Tsubasa watches him sadly, black ooze trickling down his face.

A shriek rings out nearby—that's Rei's voice. Izuku takes off running through the space, weaving through empty pods until he finds the doorway it's coming from.

From there, it's easy to find her. He can feel her fear in the air, sharp and cold as an oncoming blizzard. Izuku runs through the empty halls, ever mindful of the entourage following him.

He catches glimpses of her ahead of him, as hazy as a hallucination, a trick of the light. Izuku can only follow, calling after her futilely as she darts ever out of his reach.

Finally, she vanishes through a closed door. Izuku tries the handle, finds it unlocked, and follows her inside.

It's cluttered. Desks, drawers, and filing cabinets line the walls or stand in rows throughout the room, leaving only narrow paths between them. Metal rattles from within, startling him, but as he ventures further inside, he finally sees Rei.

He's never seen her like this.

Usually when she's upset enough, she becomes a singular black hole, a point of darkness in the midst of the rest of the world, swallowing light and exuding fear like a tangible substance. But now?

She looks scared. Izuku has never, ever seen her look so scared.

She's clawing at one of the metal filing cabinets, but she can't open it. All she can do is shake it a little.

"Rei," he whispers. "Rei, it's all right, I've got it, just hang on—"

She whips around to look at him, black eyes blown wide with desperate terror.

Black eyes.

Izuku looks over his shoulder, at the silent retinue still following him.

He wonders how he never made the connection. Maybe he just didn't

want to. Maybe he was too afraid of what it might mean.

When he opens the drawer, his hands are shaking. It sticks when he tries; the filing cabinet is more rust than metal, and it looks like it's been years since anyone tried opening one of these. Rei is at his elbow, pawing through the folders within. Her fingertips nearly catch on one, nearly inch it out, but they phase through before she can get a grip on it. Izuku grasps it himself, and pulls it free.

Dust makes him cough as he looks at the folder, searching for any clue as to what it means. It's yellow with age, creased in places it shouldn't be, and marked with water stains. Izuku looks to Rei for help, and finds her curled up in a pale, black-haired, quaking ball on the floor. All Izuku can hear from her is the soft, grating, persistent sound of static.

"R-Rei?" No answer. "Rei, you're scaring me." Still nothing.

He opens the folder, and nearly drops it.

There isn't much to it, only a few sheets of printed paper, some of the text blacked out. A rusted paperclip holds it all together, along with a tiny ziploc bag containing a lock of black hair, and a wallet-sized photograph.

A pale, round face gazes out at him from the picture, framed in long black hair. The eyes are wide and yellow, not black, but that doesn't matter. Izuku knows that face.

The next thing he knows, he's kneeling on the ground, hands shaking as he fumbles the clip off. Rust stains his fingers, and he tosses it to the floor and gathers up the photograph and the hair sample and the few pages.

He looks at the first one.

Subject 777: Examination Report #1

Name: Morigawa Hitomi

DOB: 2XXX-01-31

Sex: F

Age: 9

Blood Type: O

Quirk: Empathy

Height: 129 cm

Weight: 22 kg

Subject Notes

Beneath that, Izuku skims. They're research notes dating back decades, detailing experiments that he can only barely understand. He catches snatches of things, phrases like *drug trials* and *quirk introduction* and *response to pain stimulus* and *unforeseen side effects*. When he reaches the bottom of the page he snatches up the next one, and the next, and the next. There are only four pages in all, and they're all the same.

Test results, the fourth page reads, about halfway down.

3 Emitter-type, non-physical quirks introduced. Reasonable success.

Psychological conditioning: 78%. Reasonable success.

Physical enhancement: 7%. Failure.

Brain function: Low

NO LONGER VIABLE SUBJECT FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL TESTS

Final notes:

Subject 777 is now deceased, though not due to further experimentation. Experiment 4E proved too much for 777's higher brain functions, resulting in a vegetative state. While this disqualified 777 for further psychological testing, there were still any number of chemical and physical tests I could have run. I tried to tell AFO this, but my attempts to convince him were fruitless, as usual. This morning he visited the lab to receive a verbal report, which I gave. I informed him that there was still a plethora of knowledge to be gained from this subject before termination, but he pointed out that fresh subjects would bring us far better information, especially since he has no plans to use brain-dead subjects when he moves Project Noumu out of the experimentation stage. I pointed out that 777 could still prove useful as a control group, but did he listen? Of course not.

He grows impatient with the pace of our experiments; terminating this latest subject against my advice is only proof of this. Progress does not happen

overnight, but I suppose even an immortal man may feel the press of time.

Subject 777's remains have been properly disposed of. A hair sample will be kept for records purposes.

END OF REPORT

By the time he reaches the bottom, Izuku can no longer see the page. The words and letters blur together, and the way the yellowed paper shakes in his hands does not help.

He turns his head.

He can't see Rei's face. She's curled up into a ball, her back against one of the filing cabinets, hidden in heavy dark hair as she rocks back and forth. Crackling white noise fills the space. She's a black hole yet again, swallowing up everything in the room until nothing exists except her and Izuku and the black-eyed ghosts beyond them.

The floor beneath him is hard and cold as he crawls to her side. He reaches for her, knees aching. "Rei?"

There's a hitch in the static, before it fades away.

He tries again.

"H-Hitomi?"

This time, she flinches.

"That's your name," Izuku says softly. "Your real name, isn't it? Morigawa Hitomi?"

There's nothing, and then—

"*No*."

Izuku's blood turns to ice water in his veins. He doesn't know that voice. In ten long years, he's never heard that voice.

"I-It is," he says. His throat aches. It's hard to speak. "That's your name, Rei. That's your face. You were… you were here."

"*No*." Her hair ripples as if disturbed by wind. She curls up tighter, trembling as she rocks and shakes her head. "*No. No no no no. I don't —I don't want it.*"

"Don't want what?" Izuku reaches out, tries to brush the curtain of her hair aside so that he can see her face. Her eyes are squeezed shut as they leak black ooze.

"*It hurts*." She rocks forward, and she reaches for his hand, grips it with icy fingers. Izuku pulls her closer, but it's slow progress. "*I don't want it, I don't want it—take it back—*" The cabinets rattle, and she presses forward, presses into him until her grip is painful and she's crying out in his arms. "*It hurts! I don't want it! I don't want to remember!*"

"Okay," he chokes out. "Okay, Rei. Okay. You don't have to. We're getting out, okay? We're getting out. I'm getting you out. Let's go. Let's leave, and we'll never come back."

"*Get out,*" she screams into his chest. "*Get out, get out, get out.*"

He gathers up the pages, folds up the photograph and the hair sample inside them, and stuffs them into his pocket, and then he runs out of the records room and shuts it behind him. He reaches out blindly, grasping until he takes Rei's hand, and hurries down the hallway. The lights are even worse off then before; most of them have gone out entirely, and only a few still flicker stubbornly.

"*Jii-chan,*" he hears Tsubasa whisper, but he's past listening. He has to get out, he has to go home—he's done, he's finished here, he's survived and he's hopefully bought Bakugou some time to reach the heroes outside, and he wants to find them too and go home. He wants —

"*Jii-chan!*"

Rei's hand squeezes hard enough to crush his fingers. Izuku stumbles, comes back into himself, and finally registers the sound of footsteps steadily moving closer. He freezes, schools his face back to blankness, and prepares himself for one of the villains—except who would it be? The others are all supposed to be away, unless they've been brought back, but…

Before he can finish the thought, a lone figure rounds the corner and into the dimly lit hallway. Izuku stops short, heart pounding.

The other man stops as well, catching sight of him immediately. He draws back, seemingly startled, before his tense shoulders relax, and his face lights up in recognition.

It's a familiar face, Izuku realizes. He hasn't seen it in years, but it's hard to forget anything from the day he first realized what his quirk was.

"*Jii-chan,*" Tsubasa rasps.

Before him, his old pediatrician adjusts his spectacles and steps forward to take a closer look. "My word," says Dr. Tsubasa. "Little Midoriya Izuku. It's been *years*, hasn't it."

If ever a quirk could babble, then that is what Search is doing to him now—or at the very least, it's trying. For the moment he has it quieted, feeling the little nudges of information at a distance, to be examined at his own leisure. For example—

All-Might. Even in a simple quirk like Search, he shines like a beacon, growing ever nearer. The heroes before him will not last long—Best Jeanist is will bleed out soon, and there is little that Mount Lady or Tiger or any of the other responding heroes can do against him, especially with the rest of his henchmen present, most of them even fighting fit.

But All-Might is coming. And that means that their little game is drawing to a close.

He checks on his other assets within the facility. Bakugou Katsuki has finally found the exit. As for Midoriya…

Ah, good. The good doctor has found him. He'll soon be telling the boy of the next step in tonight's little melodrama. Either he'll send their new asset back out to join the rest of them, or he'll take him along when he makes his own efficient escape. Perfect.

And so, when All-Might lands in his midst, in the throes of what he is sure is a towering rage, he smiles behind the mask. His henchmen wisely keep their distance as they hold off the rest of the heroes. He steps forward.

"It's been so long," he says.

"Where are they?" All-Might's voice is a rumble like distant thunder.

He senses a fight ahead, but no more than that. How he's missed that —not knowing whether he might win or lose a battle.

He knows Bakugou Katsuki's location, down to the centimeter. An effort of will brings the boy onto the battleground, staggering and dazed by his quirk. Ah, right—this is the first time he's felt it, isn't it?

"Young Bakugou," All-Might calls to him, with forced calm. The boy's eyes widen at the sight of him, with just a drop of hope and relief. "Are you all right?"

"'M fine," is the short reply.

"It's all right now. This will be over soon." He can see All-Might's eyes moving, searching for the other, but All For One does not bring him forth. No need to reveal that—yet. It's been so long, after all.

He may as well allow himself to enjoy this.

At the front of the old facility, a pair of titans clash.

"Dr. Tsubasa." Izuku's mouth is dry. There are a hundred different thoughts and feelings swirling about in his head, and none of them come out on his face, or in his voice. Rei's grip on his hand is painful. The dead Noumu are moving now. Closer, step by step, to the old man who stands before him.

"*Jii-chan.*"

"I'm—I'm so very sorry, dear boy," Dr. Tsubasa says. He's smiling a little, like he's so very happy to see Izuku after so long. "You must be very confused." He beckons. "Come along with me. All For One told me I ought to find you, if I could."

Izuku doesn't obey immediately. "I'm—I'm supposed to find Bakugou?"

"Don't worry about that, he won't be angry that you couldn't," Dr. Tsubasa assures him. "It was only a test, you know. Now come along —or, would you prefer to join the others outside? I can signal him to fetch you, if you like."

"No, that's okay, he's probably busy, I just…" Izuku stares at him, swallowing against the unease that creeps over him. "I didn't expect to see you here. That's all. I-it's been a while."

The old man smiles fondly. “Yes. It has. I’m very glad you’ve found your way to us, Izuku. It’s good to see you again and this… this is a good place. You’ve been eating well, I hope? Your mother was always very good about that.”

It’s surreal, as Izuku follows him down another hallway, and into a larger room. It’s much neater than the records room he just left. The far wall is dominated by a desk covered in papers and notes, and one large computer screen showing a loading bar near completion. All the while, his old pediatrician makes small talk. He asks how well Izuku sleeps. About his favorite foods. About schoolwork. Izuku answers as if in a dream. Rei presses close and quakes.

File transfer, 88%, the screen reads. A memory drive protrudes from the side of the computer, its blue light blinking softly.

“It won’t be long now,” Dr. Tsubasa tells him. “We’ll be moving to a new facility tonight, since this one’s compromised. We’ll have to move quickly, once this transfer is complete. I’ll miss this old place, though —it may not look like much, but for the past forty years, it’s been ours.”

Forty years.

Rei’s papers dated back thirty.

“Are there others?” he asks. “Other scientists?”

“There have been, in the past,” he sighs. “But for the most part, it’s only been me. Not everyone can stomach the work that we do here.”

He thinks of Dr. Hamada. “The, um,” Izuku says. “The Noumu?”

“Among other things,” Dr. Tsubasa replies. “Quirk study, as well. And speaking of which—step closer, would you? I thought I saw something…”

Hesitantly, Izuku does so, though Rei’s fingers dig into his wrist until he might scream. Luckily, she’s holding his right hand, and not his broken left.

But Dr. Tsubasa simply shines a small flashlight in his eyes, squinting through his spectacles at something only he can see. “Ah. Tapeta lucida. Fascinating.”

Izuku blinks the colored spots out of his vision. “Um, what?”

“I only noticed by chance, when I saw you in that darkened hallway,” Dr. Tsubasa explains. “Your eyes. They have tapeta lucida—a layer of tissue that serves as a retroreflector. Often found in nocturnal animals, deep sea creatures, and most famously, cats. I imagine you’ve had trouble taking pictures?”

“Y-yeah,” Izuku answers. “My eyes show up red. And I spooked one of my classmates a couple nights ago…”

“Eyeshine,” Dr. Tsubasa says with a smile. “It’s the main visible effect of the tapetum lucidum.”

“But what does it mean?” Izuku wonders how much time he has. He wonders if All-Might has found his way here yet.

“Well, for one, it means you most likely have better night vision than those without it,” Dr. Tsubasa says. “Beyond that… who knows? It could be the full extent of your ‘invisible quirk,’ or it may only be a physical indicator of it.” He shakes his head ruefully. “Ahh, I was such a fool, all those years ago. I never checked your eyes, even after your mother said… you saw things, didn’t you? Tell me, Midoriya, what did you see?”

Izuku locks eyes briefly with a dead Noumu over the doctor’s shoulder, and keeps his voice carefully subdued. “No,” he says softly. “No, you were right, that wasn’t a quirk after all, I just… imagined things. Pretended I had friends. I was lonely back then.”

“Ah, I see…” The old man nods, and seems to accept this. He glances at the loading bar—95%.

“I-I do remember your grandson, though,” Izuku continues, and the ghost of Bakugou’s old friend flinches. “Tsubasa-kun? We used to play together.” He swallows, though his mouth and throat are dry. “How’s he doing?”

For a moment, the doctor is silent. “I’m afraid I… haven’t had the chance to speak to him recently,” he replies.

Tsubasa’s black eyes are fixed on Izuku as he answers. “That’s all right. I haven’t seen him since second grade, so it’s probably more recent than me.”

Dr. Tsubasa hums thoughtfully. “Well, he went to Jyaku Middle School, and then… oh, it’s no use, his high school escapes me. My mind isn’t what it used to be.” he shakes his head.

"*Jii-chan,*" Tsubasa-kun pleads. "*Jii-chan. Don't lie.*"

Izuku's blood runs cold.

"*You talked to me,*" Tsubasa-kun says, grasping uselessly at his grandfather's arm. "*I asked you why. You said you were sorry.*"

"*He lies,*" a dead Noumu whispers. Scattered, mangled voices take up the low cry.

"*Lies.*"

"*He lies.*"

"*Liar.*"

"*Why?*"

"Is that… you're being modest, right?" Izuku asks. He feels cold inside. Cold outside, too—that's Rei's hand, still clutched in his. "Those research notes… that's your work, isn't it?"

Dr. Tsubasa looks at him, surprised, and then smiles ruefully. "My memory is going, I'm afraid. It's why my work is so important now. I have to continue it while I still can. Before I'm no use to anyone."

"You'd have been with him, when he first fought All-Might," Izuku says. "You saved his life. All For One, I mean. All-Might told me—he thought All For One was dead. But he survived, thanks to you."

"It was a close thing," Dr. Tsubasa says softly.

"Still," Izuku says. "And… the Noumu? From what I've heard, civilian scientists still can't figure out how they work. There's the extra quirks, but also the physical enhancements. I know now that All For One did the quirks, but the physical stuff… that was you, right?"

Dr. Tsubasa gives a quiet chuckle. "Don't give All For One too much credit, now. I've studied his power—how the quirks are transferred, the effect on the mind and body."

"And you perfected it," Izuku whispers. Rei's file. Subject 777. How many subjects did it take?

The file transfer finishes, and Dr. Tsubasa pulls the memory drive and pockets it, along with several others on the desk. "Years of study," he says. "Of work and research and so, so many sacrifices." He

straightens with a smile. “But it’s for the best. All For One is far older and wiser than either of us could ever hope to be. I know that he will make sure my work serves the greater good.” He pauses, giving Izuku a shrewd look. “This interests you, does it not? The inner workings of quirks?”

“Of course,” Izuku answers, honestly enough. They had to move quickly, the doctor had said. But Tsubasa is like him—he likes to talk about his interests. It’s easy to distract someone like that. “M-my whole life—I was never sure if I even had a quirk, or if—if I had one, but I just couldn’t figure out how to use it.”

Dr. Tsubasa looks at him carefully, his mouth turned down in sorrow. “I really did you wrong, all those years ago,” he says. “I should have done more to help you, and I apologize. But now… you’re one of us, aren’t you?”

Izuku heaves a sigh, drawing it out as long as he can. He works his right hand free of Rei’s grip, and slips it carefully into his pocket. “I… I don’t know. I don’t know what I’m doing. I’m so—there are so many things I didn’t know. And so many things I thought I knew that were wrong.” He hesitates for a moment. “I’m… I’m so lost. I’m so confused. And I don’t want to betray everyone. I don’t want to turn my back on my friends. But… but they can’t help me. Not really.”

“We can,” Dr. Tsubasa tells him. Maybe, unlike All For One, he even means it. “I promise you, we can. I can teach you what I know. I won’t live forever, but maybe you can carry on my work. I’ll do my best to help you.” He turns to gather up a few more things.

In his pocket, Izuku’s hand closes around the cuffs. “Yeah. I know you will.” He moves. It’s painfully easy, overpowering an old man, even with one arm useless. One cuff goes around the doctor’s wrist, and the other snaps shut around the leg of the desk. It’s welded to the floor; he’s not getting free anytime soon.

“Izuku—” Dr. Tsubasa splutters, shocked.

“You’re going to be very helpful, Dr. Tsubasa.” Izuku’s voice is cold. Every inch of him is cold, like a brick wall against an oncoming car. He reaches into the doctor’s pockets and begins emptying them. The memory drives he stowed away. A remote communicator. Anything that might be used to pick handcuffs. He pockets it all, while the doctor stares at him in open-mouthed shock. When he’s finished, he stares right back. He doesn’t glare. He doesn’t scowl. He just stares,

blank and cold, until the color drains from the doctor's face. "You're going to stay here, and be quiet, and when the heroes come for you, you're going to go with them without fighting. You're going to tell them everything you know." He leans in closer. "That's how you're going to help me, Doctor. That's how you're going to pay for what you did to Tsubasa-kun."

The doctor chokes on good air, spluttering, shock and horror creeping over his features. "You don't know what you're talking about—Izuku, please listen—"

"Tell me you didn't," Izuku whispers. He thinks of the last day he saw Tsubasa alive, in a dark alley in Hosu City. He thinks of the records room, crammed wall to wall in experiment reports. "Tell me you didn't turn your grandson into a Noumu. Tell me you didn't murder countless people just to figure out how."

"I-I-I—" The doctor stares at him in shock. "I didn't murder them. Midoriya, I didn't—I held no ill will to them. I did nothing in malice. I was under orders. You don't understand his vision, my dear boy, and —" His eyes widen behind his glasses, knocked askew in the brief struggle. "Listen, you have to let me go. You don't understand—"

"You're right," Izuku says, standing up. "I don't understand. I will never understand. And I don't want to."

The door bangs against the wall behind him. Izuku whirls around, heart leaping to his throat—

Nana and One For All stare back, empty eyes wide.

"Please tell me that's one of the bad guys," Nana says. "'Cause half-pint, you gotta get out of here, now."

"What?" Izuku says.

"He's destroying the facility," Dr. Tsubasa says. His voice is high with desperation. "Leaving nothing useful for the authorities to find. Oh, damn it all, I've left it too long—after the file transfer finished we only had so much time. Midoriya, get me free. You have to get me free, Izuku, *please*—"

He whips around and lunges for the doctor's cuffed wrist, heart in his throat. Cold hands seize him by the arms, and he cries out when it jars his injuries, but to no avail. The ghosts drag him back.

“Wait,” he rasps out desperately. Rei has a hold of him. The dead Noumu are grasping at him, as well. “Wait, just let me free him first, let me—”

No time, One For All tells him. *I’m sorry. This isn’t your fault.*

“Wait!” he pleads. “Wait, don’t, I don’t want to—!”

They drag him bodily out of the room, until the doctor’s desperate cries fade into the distance. Izuku fights them all the way, but it’s no use. He’s weakened and injured, and they are many. They don’t need food or rest like he does.

“Run!” Nana shouts near his ear. “Izuku, just run! Follow him, he’ll get you out!”

He doesn’t recognize the route that One For All takes. All he knows is that it takes them back through the empty warehouse space, back toward the doorway leading to the hallways beyond it—

It’s like thunder, first. It begins behind him, and then it envelops him, and the world goes strange and gray.

“This brings back memories,” All For One says, and his voice sails out mockingly from beneath that damned metal mask. “Almost. I’m a bit disappointed, old friend. You were so much more fearsome when last we met.”

He’s been in his hero form for nearly an hour, and his time is running out. All-Might is limited, and the enemy knows it; as long as Bakugou is here, he can’t afford to go all out without the boy becoming collateral damage. The other villains are moving to recapture him, and Bakugou evades them—for now.

But he has to end this. He has to bring him down for good this time. He has to rescue young Bakugou and find his remaining student and make sure Endeavor and the others are holding their own against the Noumu.

“You’re looking for your boy,” All For One calls out. “Correct? You must be worried about him, all alone and afraid.” He dodges a strike, and retaliates with one of his own. His arm has grown many times its usual size, misshapen with protruding ridges, like an immense and flexible mace. “Would it comfort you, to know that he is no longer alone nor afraid?”

All-Might hesitates for a split second, and nearly pays for it when he misses death by inches. He shakes his head furiously. All For One does this—messes with his head while they fight. He pushed through before, and he can do it again.

The macelike arm swings at him, and he blocks the strike with one of his own, sending a shock wave rippling out from the point of collision.

“If you were expecting to find him frightened and grateful, you may be disappointed,” All For One tells him. “I’m afraid it’s a little late for that.”

All-Might clenches his teeth. “What are you talking about, you—”

The words are barely out of his mouth when rolling thunder erupts from within the warehouse. All-Might freezes for a split second and takes a blow to the shoulder for it, as the building explodes like a mortar mine. The outer frame of the building caves in and begins to collapse. Fiery explosions spread, sending a wide swath of destruction through the surrounding area. Screams ring out as bystanders become casualties.

He gapes, and the fiery rage in his breast turns to ice in an instant.

Iida, of course, moves the fastest. As soon as the rumble from within reaches their ears, he grabs the others—Uraraka and Todoroki under one arm, Kirishima and Yaoyorozu under the other—and rockets away from the building with an instinctive Recipro Burst. He feels his engines overheat in an instant, but it does the job. In a burst of desperate speed and strength, he drags his friends away from the building and toward the nearest cover. He drags them through a few scrapes and bruises as well, but it’s preferable to worse injuries. The explosions deafen them, but do no more than that.

When they subside, the warehouse has nearly collapsed in on itself, and Iida stares at it in horror.

“He… he was in there,” he says, stricken. “Bakugou said…”

Beside him, Todoroki and Uraraka share a single look.

“You three stay here,” Todoroki says. He’s lost the wig, and his hair is a tangled mess. “My phone’s on silent, and service is still up, so we can keep in contact.”

“We’ll be right back,” Uraraka adds.

“But—” Yaoyorozu starts, a second too late. The pair of them are off and running already, around the side, skirting the battle as they head straight for the collapsed building.

Kirishima starts to rise, but Iida stops him. Todoroki is well-trained and strong, and Uraraka’s quirk is best-suited for the half-cocked plan they’ve probably thought up. The more of them move, the more likely they’ll draw attention to themselves.

“We’ll wait,” Iida murmurs. “We’ll wait and watch, and send word in to them if we need to.”

The situation is far out of his control. It has been since the night began. All he can do now is trust in his friends, and hope for the best.

Izuku comes back into himself either seconds or minutes after the explosion hits, and the first thing he hears is crying.

He’s never heard Rei cry before. She’s made a lot of sounds over the years, but never anything that required a voice.

His entire left arm is a useless mass of pain. His head hurts. His ribs hurt. A lot of different things hurt.

“You have to understand,” Dr. Tsubasa says, and Izuku looks up.

The doctor stands over him, hands held out in an almost pleading manner. He doesn’t look much different from when Izuku last saw him, except a little paler, and lacking anything in the whites of his eyes.

“It was all in the name of progress,” he says. “Besides the change that All For One plans to bring to this world—do you realize the possible applications of this research? The possibility of physical enhancement, a deeper understanding of human psychology? A few dozen sacrifices, a few hundred even—can you honestly tell me that they are not worth the many millions of lives that could be improved with this research?”

“You *bastard*,” he hears Nana hiss.

“You need to leave,” Izuku rasps. The doctor’s ghost looks at him, startled. “You need to get out.”

“You… can see me?”

Izuku opens his mouth to repeat himself, and—

"*Jii-chan.*"

Slowly, the doctor turns around. Izuku looks past him, and sees the dead Noumu gathered just beyond.

They aren't waiting anymore.

"Oh," Dr. Tsubasa says, and Izuku has never heard so much mortal terror fit into such a small sound.

The dead descend upon him, as three figures—Nana, One For All, and Rei, move between them and him, so that he doesn't have to see what they do to him.

He can hear it just fine, though.

Izuku has cried a lot in this place. Most of the time, it was out of necessity, but now…

Now he cries because he can't stop. Even when the screams die down, and Tsubasa-kun and his grandfather and all the dead Noumu are gone, he can't stop. He can't do anything but curl up on the ground and sob until he can barely breathe.

He feels gentle hands on him. He hears Nana's voice, calling to him desperately, but he shakes his head.

He made a promise, once. He swore to himself that he would never, ever make a ghost, and now…

Now he's done that. He's made a ghost out of someone he knew, and it doesn't matter what he did, it doesn't matter why, and it doesn't matter whether it was deserved or not. All that matters is that a man is dead because Izuku was careless, because he was angry and he didn't think, and what sort of hero does that make him?

He's not sure how long he lies there, injured and sobbing and feeling alone even with ghosts at his side like they always have been, ever since he was small. He opens his eyes and finds Nana and One For All gone, and Rei is still there but he feels more alone than he's ever been before.

And then

"Hey."

A foot nudges him. The voice is familiar to him, but his vision is too hazy for him to see the face that goes with it. A nudge comes again, harder this time.

“Hey. Kid. If you’re crying, then it means you’re not dead, and if you’re not dead then you can get up and get out of here.”

A choked sob escapes him, and a pale face swims in his vision overhead.

“H-Hino?”

“Surprise,” the ghost says dryly, crouching by him. “Your pushy friend Nana found me and sent me on ahead to get you up. Something about me being enough of an asshole to pull it off.” He tilts his head to the side. “You gonna prove her wrong, or are we getting out of here?”

“I can’t,” Izuku chokes out.

“Can’t what?”

“I can’t do this. Everything—everything I try just fails, and I *can’t.*” His voice cracks pathetically, but he’s beyond caring.

“I’ll ask again, can’t *what*?” Hino retorts. “Can’t get up off the ground and walk? No one told me your legs were broken.”

“I killed someone.”

“I don’t see how that constitutes broken legs, kid.” Hino reaches out and grabs a handful of the back of his shirt. “C’mon. Get moving before the rest of this damn building falls on you.”

And part of Izuku thinks, *good, let it,* and it must show on his face because Hino spits out a curse and drags him up to his knees.

“I am not playing around,” he growls. “Get the hell up, Midoriya, or so help me I will drag you out of here by the hair—”

“What’s the point?” Izuku snaps, as anger turns his tears scalding. “Every time I’ve done anything in this place, I’ve made everything *worse* for everyone else! I can’t do this! I can’t—I just can’t.”

Hino lets go of the back of his shirt, and grabs the front instead.

“Can’t what?” he grits out in Izuku’s face. “Can’t be a hero? Is that what you’re saying? Don’t give me that *bullshit*, Midoriya.”

“Why do you even care?” Izuku spits back. “All you care about is playing stupid pranks on Endeavor, so why do you care about what happens to anybody else? Why are you even here?”

“Because *I owe you, damn it.*”

Izuku isn’t expecting this. Not the words, nor the fierceness in Hino’s voice.

“You want to know how I know it’s bullshit?” the ghost asks. “I’ve already *seen* you save someone. You saved my sister and you don’t even know her damn *name*, so don’t you dare sit there and tell me that you *can’t*!”

Izuku stares at him, confused and vaguely unnerved. “Y-your sister? I don’t—who?”

A bitter laugh escapes the ghost, and his grip on Izuku loosens just a fraction. “Fuck,” he mutters. “You really had me pegged, you know? When you said I was the kind of person who dyed my hair to piss off my family. Well, you were right, because I *hate* my fucking family. Except my sister. And you helped her.”

“I-I don’t—”

Hino’s form flickers. His dark hair fades, the color leeching out of it. “I couldn’t help her,” he says tersely. “I couldn’t do anything to help her, alive *or* dead.” The color vanishes, leaving his hair snow-white. “And then you came along. And you gave her son back to her.” He gives Izuku a little shake as he lets go. “You did more for her in one afternoon than I ever could in twenty-five years. So don’t you dare sit there and tell me you make everything worse.”

Izuku gapes at him. “You mean—you’re—you’re Todoroki’s—”

“Yeah,” he says dryly. “And speaking of which? He’s on his way. As in, he’s in here, in this building, looking for you, right now.”

The feeling of his heart dropping to his stomach is either relief or dread. Izuku isn’t quite sure which. “Where?”

“Get your ass up off the floor and I’ll show you.” As Izuku staggers to his feet, Hino cracks a sardonic grin at him. “Oh, and before I forget—I saw a face I recognized on the way in. Wanna hear something interesting about Dabi?”

The building around them may as well be made of matchsticks, and it's making Ochako's hands itch. Most of it was brought down by the initial blast, but some sections are still, just barely, standing. Other parts of the building are giving way, and she can hear the buckling architecture both near and far. Every distant rumble makes her jump. The air nearby feels cold; Todoroki has his right hand half-raised and ready.

Deku once said she and Todoroki were well-equipped for rescue work; her quirk is good for finding and freeing trapped victims, and Todoroki's right side is perfect for shoring up damaged structures. She wonders if he ever thought they'd have to put it into practice rescuing him.

Several times they have to change course, either because the way is blocked, or because Ochako recognizes the sound of a structure about to collapse. There's little need to talk; Ochako stays close to the light of Todoroki's fire, and adds the light from her flashlight to it. They tap and point to indicate better routes. They help each other over rubble without any need for a question and answer.

At some point, Ochako realizes she has no real idea how they're supposed to find Deku in all this. As sure as she is that there won't be any villains left in here, she doesn't feel comfortable shouting. How long will it take them to scour this entire ruin? How long do they have before the heroes start moving in, and they get caught?

And if Deku is here, lying injured somewhere, then how long can he afford to wait for them?

Inevitably, they reach a fork in the path. Actually, "fork" is putting it lightly. It's more like a cross section of hallways; various wall sections have fallen down, leading to several possible paths with maybe even more further. It's the kind of place where it'd be easy to forget which way they came.

They stop here, briefly breaking off from each other to inspect each possible path. They all look equally dark and forbidding, to Ochako's eyes.

"How sure are we that there won't be villains left?" Todoroki asks, rejoining her. "I doubt we have a lot of time left, and if we split up to cover more ground…"

"That's a bad idea," Ochako says. She sees him scowl. "Todoroki, no. I know this was sort of my idea, but… we promised Iida, and Momo.

We promised we wouldn't take more risks than we could handle. It's bad enough that we came in here at all. Let's not make things any worse."

"We have *nothing*," Todoroki reminds her. "We have no idea which way to go, and we can't afford to keep wandering around while the building comes down around us."

"Well we can't afford to wander around *alone* either, Todoroki," Uraraka grits out. "Look, I know you're scared, but we can't just…"

At first, she thinks it's a mirage. She sees it, she's sure she sees it, in the darkness over Todoroki's shoulder, down one of the middle-right paths. She doesn't even mean to point her flashlight that way; it's just how she's holding it, and because of that, she sees the figure dash past, just beyond the reach of the beam.

For a split second, Ochako sees her clear as day, and then she blinks and the darkness is empty.

It wasn't much. Not a villain, or a Noumu, or Deku. As far as Ochako can tell, it was just a little girl—but what would a little girl be doing down here?

"Uraraka?" Todoroki calls to her. He glances over his shoulder, as if following her gaze, but there's nothing to see anymore, if there ever was.

In the back of her mind, Ochako remembers the drawings on the fridge.

She'd only glanced at them briefly, before Iida called her back out, but she still got a good look at the wobbly crayon drawings that Deku must have made when he was little. A dark-haired girl had been in several of them.

Mrs. Midoriya had tried to claim that it was her quirk, to talk to people who couldn't be seen. Ochako had caught the lie.

"That way," she says. She doesn't wait for Todoroki to answer; she just moves. She has to clamber through a hole in the wall, but it's easy enough to clear the rubble and make it to the other side. If she just goes, Todoroki will probably follow.

Ochako looks in the direction that she saw the girl move. She shines her flashlight to the end of the hallway.

It's brief, again. Almost like a reflection, or a trick of the light playing off the shadows. For an instant the beam falls upon the little girl standing at the hallways' end, face hidden in dark hair, watching Ochako before she vanishes again.

Sure enough, Todoroki catches up to her. "Uraraka, I thought *you* were the one who said—"

"It's this way," she says. "I—I think I heard something. Come on."

"I didn't hear—"

"Just trust me?" She meets his eyes briefly. He sighs, but doesn't argue with her.

They reach the end of the hallway and turn the corner. Ochako sees nothing but a pile of rubble blocking most of the path, but she presses on, clambering over it to the other side. There are no more forks in the road; just one path ahead of them.

And then, just ahead, she hears something for real.

The hallway bends up ahead. Ochako catches just a hint of uneven footsteps, before someone comes stumbling into view.

A head turns toward them. Eyes flash white as they catch the edge of Ochako's flashlight beam.

She freezes where she is, and Todoroki stops short. From the end of the hallway, a noise like a strangled sob reaches them.

Ochako has never been much for running; she's not bad at it, but she's not the best in their class. But now, for once, she matches Todoroki pace for pace as they rush forward.

Deku slams into them with a choked cry of pain. One arm goes around her neck, the other around Todoroki's, and Deku drags them both into a hug. Ochako hugs back, whispering an apology when she squeezes too hard and hurts him. Todoroki's only a beat behind.

"You shouldn't be here," Deku whispers. "It isn't safe. A-All For One —"

"Bakugou told us," Todoroki says. "All-Might's fighting him now. Are you injured?"

"Yeah." Deku pulls back, wincing. Todoroki re-ignites his left hand

once he's at a safe distance, and Ochako hisses through her teeth when she gets a good look at Deku's face. "It's mostly my left arm—" He stops, staring at Todoroki's other arm, and the splint on his right hand.

Todoroki moves it behind his back. "It's nothing—"

"I'm sorry." Deku's staring at Todoroki's injured hand with quiet, wide-eyed dismay. "I-Is it broken? I didn't mean to, I swear—I just—I knew they had me and I just wanted you to let go."

Ochako's heart sinks, and she feels Todoroki stiffen beside her. "Oh, *Deku*."

"It's nothing," Todoroki repeats, and links his right arm around Deku's left. "Now come on—it's time we weren't here."

The building is shifting around them again. Ochako takes hold of Deku's other arm. "C'mon, Deku. Let's get you out of here."

The battle before them seems to last forever. Tenya's heart has been in his throat since the building first went up in fire and thunder, and the few glimpses he catches of the fight only heighten his tension.

All-Might is the most powerful hero; everyone knows that. Tenya has known that since he was a child.

And yet, as he watches his teacher meet the villain called All For One head-on, again and again, he realizes something terrifying.

All-Might is *struggling*.

It shouldn't be possible.

"It's because of Bakugou." As if reading his mind, Yaoyorozu grips his arm to steady herself as she speaks. "He has to hold back, because Bakugou's in the line of fire."

"Then we have to get him back out," Kirishima murmurs at his other side. "Long as All-Might's in his face, I doubt that guy'll be able to teleport him back."

"There's nothing we can do at the moment," Tenya warns them. "He's surrounded by villains, and there are only three of us."

A moment passes, and Yaoyorozu's grip tightens. "Make that six."

His first thought is that Uraraka and Todoroki are back, but that would only make five, wouldn't it? Unless…

Tenya looks to her, then follows her gaze back over his shoulder. For the first time since this terrible night began, he feels his heart lift.

Supported on both sides, Midoriya looks much the worse for wear. His face is battered, his clothes torn and dirty, and the bruises beneath his eyes have only deepened.

But, he's alive. He's here. He's within reach.

Tenya stretches a hand out toward him. Midoriya meets his eyes, then looks past him. His face goes paler.

"How long?" he rasps. Tenya can barely hear him over the din of battle. "How long has he been fighting?"

Tenya turns back around to see. "It's difficult to say…"

He blinks.

There's steam on the battlefield, surrounding All-Might on all sides. Tenya doesn't know what it means, but it can't be anything good.

"Midoriya!" Kirishima lunges forward, nearly tackling Midoriya in a hug. Both Uraraka and Todoroki gently press him back. "Listen—I hate to ask this. I know you've been through a lot. But…" His eyes are bleak. "You know more than we do. Bakugou's right in the middle of that, and it's keeping All-Might from going all out against the guy in the mask. Is there a way we can get him out?"

Midoriya moves forward. He's limping a little, but he gently sidles away from Iida's silent offer of support, and moves up to their vantage point beside Yaoyorozu.

There's something different about him, Tenya realizes as he watches his friend—how he moves, how he carries himself, how his eyes spark and glow in the dim light.

He looks… cold. There's no other way to describe it.

"Yeah," Midoriya says. "There is." He looks back, and his eyes are like stone. "I'm gonna need all your help."

In the end, it's a blow to the side that does it.

The dregs of One For All are fumes now, and keeping his power within his grasp is like trying to hold smoke in his hands.

But he does it anyway, because he must. Because there is nothing else that he can do.

He is angry, and perhaps it makes him careless. Perhaps the pressure and fear within him get the best of him, and All For One slips past his defenses, swinging a reinforced limb straight into his wound from six years back.

Pain explodes his vision. For a few nauseating seconds he is blind and deaf, numb to everything but the taste of blood in his mouth. When his sight comes back, it is obscured with steam, and the arm that he holds out as a shield is wasted and frail.

“How unfortunate,” All For One drawls at him. The mask makes his voice sound more like a machine than a man. “Did you ever imagine that the truth would come out this way?”

Toshinori looks down, at his lopsided mess of a body as his failing hold on One For All keeps only some of his muscle mass in place. He looks up, at the lights shining down from a news helicopter.

He looks at his other arm, still swollen with muscle. How many more strikes does he have within him? How much longer can this battle be dragged out?

What does he have left to fight for, now that the world he helped build is crashing down around his ears?

They’re shocked. Every one of them saw it happen, and the sight leaves them stricken until Izuku has to bark at them.

“Hey!” he snaps. Todoroki looks back at him, face tense. Iida and Yaoyorozu look to him as well, with Uraraka barely a beat behind. Izuku has to smack Kirishima on the back of his head to get him to turn around, too. “We’re running out of time. Do you all know what you need to do?”

“Yes,” Todoroki answers.

“Wait,” Yaoyorozu says. “What about me?”

He digs into his pocket, brings out the handful of memory drives he

stole from the lab, and presses them into her hands. “Take those. Keep them safe. Give them back to me when this is over. If you can’t, make sure they go to a hero you trust. Aizawa-sensei would be best.”

“A-alright, but—wait, what do you mean ‘if I can’t’?”

“Um, Deku?” Uraraka speaks up. “I think we all know what we’re supposed to do. But… what are you going to be doing?”

To be perfectly honest, the last thing he wants to do is answer that. They’ll only get worried. Or worse, they’ll try to stop him.

He looks beyond them, to the ones they can’t see. Rei is still here, still silent and clinging to him. Hino and Tensei are here, watching for his next move. And when he turns back to the battleground, he can see Nana at All-Might’s right side, and One For All at his left.

And throughout the battlefield, all around them…

There must be hundreds of them. More dead that Izuku can count. They surround the two combatants, pale and spectral, every one of them watching and waiting to see who walks away from this fight, because watching is all that they can do.

Hundreds of ghosts. All For One has lived a long time, and it shows.

He’s already broken his vow. He’s already handed one murderer to the ghosts that waited for him. If they get what they want, how much more sleep can he possibly lose?

The ground beneath him shifts, and he hears warning cries from his friends. He glances down at the black tar forming around his feet, and it’s almost a relief to see. It means someone else is making the decision for him.

A warm hand closes around his, and he follows it back to its owner’s face.

He doesn’t panic. This time, he can aim for pressure points. This time, he can make Todoroki let go without hurting him.

“He has Ragdoll’s quirk,” he tells them. “So I’m going to make sure he’s looking at me instead of anyone else. Get in position. Stick to the plan. If everything goes right, you’ll make it out with both of us.”

He doesn’t hear them reply.

“Tell me,” All For One says. “What is it like, to watch everything you’ve ever worked for crumble around you? What is it like to know that everything you’ve ever done was for nothing?”

“None of it was for nothing.” Toshinori spits blood when he speaks. “It’s too late, All For One. I already passed on my power.”

“Yes.” He can’t see the face behind that mask, but Toshinori can sense that his enemy is smiling. “I know this. You made a fascinating choice —I did so enjoy getting to know him, these past few days.”

“Then you know he’s strong,” Toshinori retorts. “No matter what happens today, he is strong. Even if you kill me now, All For One… he will be so much more than I ever was.”

The masked head tilts to the side. “…Are you so sure of that?”

His heart leaps to his throat. “If you’ve harmed him—”

All For One laughs, clear and cold. “Nothing so graceless, Toshinori. You ought to know me better than that. I didn’t need to kill him, or take his quirk. All I wanted was to destroy what you’ve created. And I’ve done that.”

His veins flow with ice water instead of blood. “What are you talking about—?”

“Children are so pliable, these days,” All For One says. “Even the ones that think they hate you. You just have to know how to talk to them.”

“*What did you do.*” Rage and fear boil up within him. “What lies did you poison him with?”

“Why don’t you ask him?” All For One’s hand twists. There’s a blur of black, and—

Izuku stands at his mortal enemy’s side, hunched and battered with torn clothes and blood on his face, staring at Toshinori with the coldest eyes he ever hoped to see.

“Don’t look so shocked,” his enemy says. “He’s a smart boy. Even he knows that it’s better to learn from your teachers than copy them.” He pauses, and there’s a note of satisfaction in the way he tilts his head toward Izuku. “This will end soon. Once this is over, I can’t imagine you’ll be seeing each other again. But I’m not without a heart—if there’s anything you’d like to say to one another before then, now is

the time."

There's a split second of blinding terror, a single moment in which despair comes crashing down on his flagging spirit, and his heart sinks so low in his chest that it threatens never to rise again.

And then, his student turns his head, shuts one eye in an unmistakable wink, and waggles his right hand.

Hi All-Might, he finger-spells. *I'm ok. AFO blind. Can't see sign.*

Toshinori's eyes widen.

Weak right side, left shoulder, left knee. Ragdoll told me.

He wants to cry, honestly. And if All For One is blind, then maybe he can even get away with it.

"Well?" All For One prompts.

"No," Izuku says aloud.

"Hm. A shame. Very well, then—"

"I mean," Izuku says. "No. I'm talking to you. I know, it's probably hard to tell, if you can't see which way my head's pointing."

Toshinori chokes on blood, cutting off a warning.

"I mean, it's been interesting," Izuku goes on, and begins to shift away from All For One and toward Toshinori, until he's standing at the side, halfway between them, and facing the enemy. "Very exciting. But I'd like to go home now."

Silence stretches, for a few frozen seconds.

"You seem surprised," Izuku says. His voice is flat, almost dead. If anything, he sounds disinterested.

"Perhaps," All For One says, in a low, quiet tone. "You ought to think very hard about what you are saying, boy."

"Oh, I have. I've thought about everything I've ever said to you. And I honestly didn't expect you to believe most of it." He pauses. "I know I was feeding you bullshit, but I didn't think you'd actually swallow it."

"Izuku," Toshinori warns.

“Thanks for letting me run around your hideout for a while, though,” he continues, as if heedless of the danger he’s playing with. “I found some cool stuff.”

There’s another beat of silence, as the world stands still. And then—

The breath leaves All For One in a metallic hiss. “You… *cunning little viper.*”

“That means a lot, coming from you.”

“Now, this *is* a surprise.” To anyone listening, All For One sounds calm. Toshinori wonders if Izuku can hear the quiet tremble beneath the machine-like smoothness, like a bowstring stretched taut. “I knew you were a clever one, but I never thought that All-Might would choose a successor with such a poisonous little tongue.”

“Don’t take it personally,” Izuku tells him. His eyes haven’t lost their chill. “I lie to everyone.”

“And look where it’s gotten you.” All For One steps forward, and Izuku steps back. “Do you think your teacher can protect you, when he’s this close to death himself? You’re as good as alone.”

“You’re wrong,” Izuku says, and his voice shakes only a little. “You’re wrong about him and you were wrong about me. You were wrong about Bakugou, too. Did you know that when I told him to burn me and leave me behind, he didn’t want to? I had to yell at him to get him to do it.”

Something hisses within the mask, and it’s not the respirator. Toshinori braces himself, ready throw himself between them if need be. Even if he can’t win, he can give his student time to run.

“All-Might?” Izuku’s voice tugs his attention away, and the boy catches his gaze and holds it. “He was right about one thing. About learning from teachers, instead of copying them.” His green eyes bore into Toshinori’s. “Don’t copy her.”

“Brave words.” All For One’s mace of an arm ripples and changes again. The metallic ridges protruding from the flesh look sharper now. “Perhaps you should have feared me instead.”

Izuku’s eyes flash as he looks back. “You think I don’t? You *do* scare me, All For One. But the thing is, I’m always afraid. Every minute of every day. And when you’re afraid for that long, you forget what it’s

like to feel anything else." His hands curl into fists. "And now, when something frightening comes along, I can't tell the difference anymore between the new fear and the old." His mouth twists into a look of contempt. "Of course you scare me. You think that makes you *special*?"

"Izuku, *stop*." Toshinori's voice cracks.

It cracks because he feels All For One's menace ripple out in an almost tangible wave. In all his years, Toshinori has never been sure whether it was a quirk or simply the power of All For One's presence. He exudes pure malice as if it's a chemical weapon, seeping beneath the skin, into lungs and hearts and eyes, until it replaces all sense with distilled terror. It brings images to Toshinori's mind, of blood and ruin, widespread death and destruction. In the face of that fear, all his mind will let him see is Nana dead and Izuku murdered in front of him and everyone he has ever known and cared for screaming to him for help, crying out as they suffer and die beyond his reach.

It takes a moment to shake off the feeling, before his vision clears and he sees Izuku very much alive in front of him, trembling and crying with bared teeth and cold, cold eyes.

"I can see now that I was mistaken with you, Midoriya Izuku," All For One's voice booms from behind the mask. "I will enjoy watching you suffer.

"No you won't," Izuku answers in a voice all cracked and broken. "You won't get the chance."

"Perhaps not. But the legacy I leave behind will only grow stronger. You're a fool if you think that one victory means—"

"Where's your doctor, All For One?" Izuku asks.

All For One stops.

He doesn't just hesitate.

He *stops*.

Toshinori feels the taut bowstring snap in two.

"You shouldn't have killed her," Izuku tells him quietly. "Maybe you wouldn't have lost so much, if you hadn't. Or maybe I would've found another reason to hate you. It's not like you make it hard."

“What are you talking about?” All For One snarls behind the mask.

“It doesn’t matter if I tell you.” Izuku’s eyes burn cold with anger. “I doubt you ever even learned her name.”

All For One lunges, but it’s slow, even to Toshinori’s eyes. The macelike limb seems to drag through the air, instead of whipping around with the same blinding speed as before.

(He can’t see, of course. He can’t see the hands holding it back, dozens upon hundreds of pairs of hands, holding back the blow, slowing it down enough for Toshinori to catch it, and for the boy to slip beneath it.)

One For All lights up the night. Izuku kicks out at All For One’s weak knee, and in the space left by the enemy’s pain, he hurtles clear.

Something flies overhead.

The plan had been simple. A ramp of ice and Iida’s speed give them momentum, and Uraraka’s quirk takes away the weight that might have held them down. With Iida on one side, Todoroki on the other, and Kirishima higher up in the middle, Izuku sees his three friends sailing through the air above the battle, and hears Kirishima’s desperate call.

“*Bakugou! Bakugou, up here!*”

Bakugou is just ahead, surrounded by the remainder of the League of Villains. His head tilts back, and his eyes widen at the sight.

“*Grab my hand!*” Kirishima yells. Bakugou doesn’t hesitate. A series of powerful explosions send him hurtling upward, and Izuku readies himself to leap after him.

A hand closes around his arm, hard and cruel and burning at the touch.

“Not so fast, Midoriya.” Dabi’s voice sounds close by his ear.

Izuku whips around until they’re almost nose to nose, staring the villain dead in the eye as he whispers back.

“*Go home to your mother, Todoroki-kun.*”

Dabi lets go. Izuku rips himself away, calls One For All into his limbs,

and leaps.

He feels hands behind him, supporting him, boosting him upward until his friends are within reach. He's surrounded by the dead, reaching for him and helping him. Just for a moment, Izuku feels himself reaching back, not with his hands, but with something else.

It's Todoroki who catches him by the hand. This time, Izuku doesn't let go.

A warp gate opens, even though Kurogiri is unconscious. All For One's hand twists, and Magne's quirk activates at his command instead of hers. The scattered remnants of the league are forcibly brought together and thrust through the portal. When it finally closes, cutting off Shigaraki's final scream of protest, the two of them are alone on the battlefield.

"You've lost," Toshinori says.

One. He has one more strike left in him. He has to make it count.

"I won years ago, Toshinori." All For One hisses back. "Do you know why? Because I planted the destruction of this world as we know it. It's only a matter of time."

"Then I will raise its salvation." Toshinori steps forward. "I will bring you down now, All For One. And they will bring down Shigaraki Tomura."

"You haven't figured it out, have you?" All For One says. Gone is his facade of calm and control. His voice is tight with rage, even behind the mechanical quality the mask gives it. "You believe yourself the savior of the world, when you failed to save someone who should have been so close to you." His breath hisses in and out through the mask. "Shigaraki Tomura, born Shimura Tenko. What would your precious Nana say, if she knew that you had failed her own grandson?"

Toshinori flinches back as if struck. His heart has been torn and savaged so many times over the past three days, and All For One threatens to shred it completely.

His heart nearly fails him again, but—

Don't copy her.

He can't fall here. Not when he has a student—when he has many students waiting for him to raise them. Not when there are civilians here, trapped and injured by the destruction of the warehouse and its surrounding streets.

I can't die yet. I have too much to do.

He stokes the failing sparks within him, gathers up the dregs of One For All until there is nothing left to take. He has one more strike left in him.

He meets All For One in the middle, one last time.

They don't see it. None of them see it, except for Izuku.

No one see hundreds of silent spectators finally move. No one sees them closing in and reaching for the enemy, not for his flesh but for the metal mask on his head.

Everyone sees the final blow as it lands, but no one sees the hundreds of hands stretching out, clawing and tearing at the mechanisms that keep their killer breathing and beyond their grasp.

No one sees that.

They see All-Might standing alone on the battlefield, battered and broken, and they see him point, and they hear the words *You're next* ring out from the Symbol of Peace. But no one sees the pale, silent man standing at his side, tears rolling down his face as he lifts his hands and signs to the one person who can.

It's done. Thank you, and good luck .

Izuku sees it from where he stands, exhausted and supported on all sides by friends, both living and dead.

He turns, buries his face in Todoroki's shoulder, and sobs until his voice is gone.

Chapter End Notes

CW: abuser POV, attempted emotional manipulation, human experimentation, implied experimentation on children, medical abuse, child murder, bombing, character death (villains).

If you think that that throwaway line about contouring wasn't a

reference to SailorJ's video on the subject (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zJaaLXZwmsU) then you are wrong.

Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

There's so much art... you guys are so nice... and talented...

asian-ascian

untraditionaleagle

biteitwhenitssoft

meteorblazes

justyouraveragefandomthrash

nerdy-critter

chaaaaro

fingerspellingtopassthetime

narcolepticpansy

etsukow

kazzarole

naomi-rose-artz

cosmickatsu

emilyka-artisticweirdo

imreallyheckinsad

hey-there-hunter

coffee-and-ramen

randumbdaze

spoopy-art

thehavster

irene-draws

morningisnotalright

magicmiss

koujakki

As always, this story has a TV Tropes page!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The world stopped feeling real either minutes or hours ago; Izuku can't be sure. He can't be sure of a lot of things: where he is, what time it is, whether or not he's really all that safe.

The wave is coming. He can feel his mind turning somersaults in his head, a surefire sign that all the pressure and sickening terror, everything he has spent the past three days pushing back and pushing back, is about to come crashing in at last. This may be the longest he's ever delayed it, and so much has happened within that time. He's going to drown.

But—that's okay. It's okay because he's holding on to someone's hand, and as long as he doesn't let go, he can always follow it back to the surface.

There are people talking, but it feels as if his ears are stuffed with cotton. He can hear words, but he can't pick them apart to understand them. Blackness creeps in from all sides, but he can just make out—lights. Uniforms. *Police and paramedics,* he realizes distantly.

The warm hand tightens around his, and he squeezes back. People hold things tighter when they're afraid they might lose them. Someone speaks, and the voice is familiar—*Iida. Iida's here. Iida never left.* The hand grips his, the wave towers over him, and he braces himself to drown.

The hand loosens, and lets go.

In a panic, Izuku finds himself floundering, scrambling away from the encroaching wave as it moves in. He reaches back, frantic.

It comes back, only this time it rests on his right shoulder, so warm it's nearly hot through his shirt. A colder hand comes to his left arm, avoiding the burn—Todoroki. Todoroki's here but he's leaving *why is he leaving—*

Words come into focus.

“Midoriya. You have to go with them.”

Izuku chokes.

The hands squeeze his arms gently. “*Listen*. I don’t like it either, but they’ll take care of you. It’s safe. It’s over now.”

Don’t leave, he tries to say, but his mouth won’t obey.

The hands move again, from his arms to the sides of his face, and suddenly Todoroki’s forehead is against his, and his eyes are close enough that Izuku can see them even through the tunnel vision. “I’ll be back as soon as I can. I promise.”

And then there are uniformed bodies between them, and Izuku stumbles and flounders along, and once again he can’t afford to drown just yet.

He presses back against the wall of the ambulance, wide-eyed and fighting against the tunnel vision. He can’t hide. He can’t drown. He can’t go blind. He can’t afford to do any of those things, not when he’s alone like this, not when his living friends are gone and the only company he has are the paramedics treating his shoulder and—

Rei.

Rei’s still here.

At least that’s something.

Shouta isn’t entirely sure where his suit is at the moment, and he’s even less sure that it’s all in one place.

He vaguely remembers throwing the jacket in Sekijirou’s general direction after the press conference ended. With the knowledge that the rescue raids were taking place, he’d felt simultaneously strangled and exposed without his gear on.

But now, with his jumpsuit on and the weight of his capture weapon settled around his shoulders, he feels more like a pro hero again, and less like a trained monkey dolled up for the crowds to stare at.

In the end, there’s neither room nor time for him to join in the battle or rescue operations. He knew there wouldn’t be; there’s too much

distance between him and the two locations in Yokohama.

He sees the news broadcast, though. He doubts there's a living soul in Japan who doesn't.

Clean-up is still underway by the time he reaches the site of All-Might's last stand. A team of pros headed by Endeavor has already cleared up the Noumu at the other location. And while Shouta knows that the part he played was necessary, he can't help but feel extraneous. Like an extra piece, tossed to the side and taking up space.

"Sensei?"

He startles at the familiar voice, though he doesn't show it. Yaoyorozu is here—what is Yaoyorozu doing here?—dressed to blend in with the crowd, approaching him with clear trepidation.

"I didn't engage with any villains," she says quickly, as if reading the look on his face. "I just—here. Midoriya said to give you these. I don't know what they are."

She pushes four small external drives into his hands, and hurries away.

Before he can pursue her to question her further, a text from Tsukauchi directs him to a hospital in Kamino Ward. As much as he hates to leave this be for now, he's needed elsewhere, so he pockets the drives and files away Yaoyorozu's strange appearance for later.

The hospital is not the one where All-Might will be; that one's kept under wraps for security's sake. But Shouta isn't there for All-Might.

He finds Bakugou first.

The reason for this is that Bakugou isn't in a hospital room. He's sitting with an officer, stone-faced but not scowling, and looks to be quietly and tersely answering questions. There's gauze over his collarbone, but otherwise he looks unhurt.

His hands are shaking.

The officer does a double-take as Shouta approaches. "Ah, Eraserhead. We're just debriefing—it'll just be a few more minutes."

A few more minutes for this session, Shouta knows. They'll only do basic surface-level stuff for now, and come back for more in-depth

questions once Bakugou's had time to recover.

He locks eyes with his student for a moment. Bakugou can only meet his eyes for a few seconds before looking away.

"All right?" Shouta asks.

Bakugou winces, but nods. Shouta doesn't blame him; this is the gentlest he's ever spoken to Bakugou before.

"I'm glad," he says. "I'll be back when I've checked on Midoriya." He steps away.

"Sensei."

He looks back just in time to see Bakugou look away again, lowering his eyes to his lap.

"I used my quirk on him," he says shortly, and Shouta's heart leaps up into his throat. "It was complicated, and I didn't want to, and he told me to, but the point is I did it." He pauses, throat bobbing as he swallows. "That's all."

Shouta frowns. He's not sure what that means. Something tells him he won't be sure until he has the chance to talk to Midoriya.

"Thank you for telling me," he says after a moment. "We'll talk more later."

He doesn't have to ask around for where his remaining student is, because another officer intercepts him. This one he recognizes; it's Tamakawa, one of Tsukauchi's closest colleagues.

"A little outside your jurisdiction, isn't it?" Shouta asks.

"A little." Tamakawa's ears flick backward. "But I was called in ahead of time, given my familiarity with your students. And on that note, I could use your help."

Shouta's eyes narrow. "Is something wrong with Midoriya?"

Tamakawa starts leading him further down the hall. "He's in considerably worse shape than your other student. Nothing overtly serious, but he'll be staying overnight for treatment. But that's not the problem; the problem is that he's awake, but… not very responsive."

"Catatonic?" Shouta asks.

“Not exactly.”

The officer leads him into a smaller hospital room, empty except for its single occupant and a nurse checking his vitals. The boy leans away from her, as far back as he can while still submitting to treatment, and watches the nurse as if he half-expects her to sprout fangs and spit poison. His face is empty of expression, but his eyes are constantly on the move, roving from the nurse to to the window to the doorway. As soon as the nurse steps back, he presses back as far as the bed will allow, grips handfuls of the hospital blanket, and continues watching the window and the door.

Checking for threats, Shouta notes absently. *And keeping an eye on escape routes.*

The nurse looks as if she’d like to protest, but she sees the look on Shouta’s face and reluctantly backs off. Shouta steps forward with a quiet sigh.

“Midoriya.”

His student zeroes in on him in an instant, as if just noticing him, and Shouta spends a moment assessing what he sees. Tamakawa was right; he’s considerably worse off than Bakugou. Bruises mottle his body, standing out sickly purple and green on his face in particular. His left shoulder is bandaged, his hand is splinted, and his arm hangs in a sling.

Shouta brushes him accidentally as he moves to sit by him, and his student twitches as if shocked. Shouta is careful to sit on the side opposite the injured arm, careful not to think about the fact that the last time he spoke to Midoriya, the last time he touched Midoriya, was three nights ago when he reset that arm.

“I guess I can’t fault your honesty,” Shouta says. “You said you’d see me once everyone was safe, and you’ve technically kept your word.”

Midoriya’s right hand still clutches the sheets, white-knuckled and shaking, until he lets go and transfers the vicelike-grip to Shouta’s arm. Hollow green eyes meet his, and Midoriya may not be making a sound, but Shouta knows a plea for help when he sees one.

His student looks away again, to the doorway. “Midoriya.” He shifts his arm, starts to pry Midoriya’s hand loose, but stops when he sees the spike of panic it causes. So instead, he curls his hand over Midoriya’s grasping fingers, until his student is looking at him again,

the way a drowning man looks at a life preserver. “It’s over. You’re safe.”

Midoriya breathes in, wheezing a little, and shakes his head as if to clear it. He lets go of Shouta’s arm to squeeze his hand instead.

“There’s no one here you need to protect,” Shouta tells him, and the dam breaks.

It’s probably hours overdue. For all Shouta knows, it’s three days overdue. It would not surprise him in the least if Midoriya has spent his captivity suppressing a breakdown.

It’s eerie, for all that it’s not Shouta’s first panic attack. The problem is how quiet it is. Even the wheezing breaths are muffled, and tears stream down his student’s face with no accompanying sobs. Shouta keeps talking, quiet and calm, as Midoriya falls apart and squeezes his hand numb.

It’s only when his breathing has evened out—though the tears haven’t stopped—that Midoriya shifts, and suddenly his head is pressed to Shouta’s chest.

This isn’t his area. He’s never been touchy-feely, not with students nor with civilian victims—not even with friends, really. He’s Midoriya’s teacher, not his mother.

Unfortunately, his mother isn’t here at the moment. She won’t be here for a couple hours.

Shouta ignores Tamakawa, ignores his own misgivings, and wraps his arms around his student’s trembling shoulders until the panic finally runs out.

It is not over quickly.

By the time it is, Midoriya has exhausted himself so thoroughly that he falls asleep against Shouta. Shortly after that the nurse returns, helps Shouta extricate himself, and makes Midoriya as comfortable as a hospital mattress will allow. Shouta stands up, feeling far more tired than he has any right to, considering that he hasn’t faced a single villain tonight. The nurse shoos both him and Tamakawa out.

“Sorry,” he says. “You probably wanted to debrief him.”

“The boy’s well-being comes first,” Tamakawa says with a shrug. “It

can't be helped, and besides, we aren't going anywhere. Everything life-or-death urgent has already passed."

Shouta nods, and goes to check on Bakugou again. He has a hospital room to himself as well, though he's awake and alert and still dressed in his own clothes.

"Where's Deku?" he asks, the moment he sees Shouta walks in.

"Asleep," he replies. "Injured, but not badly." He pauses. "His shoulder was bandaged."

Bakugou looks away. "I didn't want to," he says. "He asked—he yelled at me until I did it anyway."

"Why?" Shouta's careful not to make it sound like an accusation.

"He had—he had some kind of plan. I dunno." Bakugou shrugs roughly. "He played nice. Got them all thinking he was on their side, and they bought it. Then—he helped spring me, and told me to burn his shoulder. Figured he wanted to make it extra convincing. I don't know why. He didn't tell me and there wasn't time to drag it out of him."

Shouta sighs harshly. Bakugou is aggressive and rude, but not a liar. And besides, it would explain quite a lot. If Midoriya has spent the past few days playing dangerous games with villains, then no wonder he looks so battered and exhausted.

It might explain the drives that Yaoyorozu thrust at him, as well.

"It'll come out when he has the chance to explain himself," Shouta says. "They'll probably have more questions for you later, but for now, they'll be sending you home tonight."

Bakugou nods mutely.

"I'm sorry for not preventing this," Shouta goes on. "And I'm glad our mistakes didn't cost you more than they already have. It's good that you're safe."

His student fidgets, and won't look at him. "Whatever," he mutters, but he sounds more embarrassed than anything else.

Shouta makes his way to the front to wait for Tsukauchi to arrive. It's awkward to discuss important things over text, but as far as Shouta

knows, Tsukauchi is still wrapping things up with Endeavor and the horde of captured Noumu.

He hates the waiting. It feels as if this entire ordeal has been nothing but waiting, and Shouta has been denied the physical release of a proper fight. It's as if he's been on cleaning duty the whole time: first damage control with the school and the parents and the media, and now he's left to help sweep up the mess in the aftermath.

When Shouta steps out to the front lobby of the hospital, he bites his tongue and curses his poor luck and troublesome students that keep showing up where they shouldn't be. Standing at the front desk are Todoroki Shouto and Uraraka Ochako, faced with an over-tired receptionist who looks as if she'd rather be anywhere else. Shouta can relate.

"—don't need to see him or anything, we just want to know how he's doing," he hears Uraraka argue.

"Seeing him would be *nice*," Todoroki bites out.

"I'm sorry, but I can't give out that—" The receptionist catches sight of Shouta approaching, and her eyes flash with a silent plea for help. His students see her attention shift, and both of them look over their shoulders and freeze at the sight of him.

It's been a long night. It's only going to get longer. Shouta doesn't need this.

"What do you two think you're doing here?"

Uraraka at least has the grace to look apologetic. Todoroki meets his gaze with sullen defiance.

"Where's Midoriya?"

"Resting. Do I even want to know how you two knew to come here in the first place?"

Todoroki blinks, and his face twitches but gives nothing away. Uraraka is a little worse at hiding her guilt. For a moment, Shouta's memory takes him back a short while ago, when Yaoyorozu thrust a handful of external drives at him, jostling his arms and brushing at his sleeves. He'd been distracted of course, but now, in hindsight…

It takes a bit of searching, but Shouta finds the tiny tracking chip

caught in the fabric of his sleeve. It was deftly placed; under different circumstances, Shouta might have been proud of Yaoyorozu's quick hands. He looks at the chip, then at his two students.

"That was my idea—"

"Sensei it's not Momo's fault, I told her to—"

"Stop," he cuts them off. They fall silent, and Shouta takes a second look at them. They look… scruffy. Dirty, and a little bruised. Far more dirty and bruised than they ought to have looked if they'd been standing at the sidelines. Shouta's heart sinks. That means broken rules, and broken rules mean a lot of difficult choices about consequences. "By rights I should be calling your parents right now, at the very least."

"He's a little busy at the moment," Todoroki says flatly.

"I, um, don't live at home," Uraraka adds.

He sighs. "Midoriya's resting right now," he says, and the two of them stand a little straighter. "He's injured, but not seriously. I can't make them let you back there, but I can tell you that he's been treated. Bakugou's probably going to be out soon." Uraraka's already pulling out her phone, texting someone. Or texting everyone, for all he knows.

The hospital doors slide open, and a flurry of running footsteps turn Shouta's head. The moment he sees who it is, he takes his students firmly by the shoulders and draws them to the side, away from the front desk.

Mrs. Midoriya nearly trips and falls over the desk, wild-eyed and frantic. "My son is here," she says. "Midoriya Izuku. Where is he? Can I see him?" She fumbles out her ID card at the receptionist's request.

Evidently she has a much easier time of getting through than his students had. "He's received treatment, but we'll be keeping him overnight just to be safe," the receptionist tells her. "But in the meantime, you can go in and see him. Second floor, room 209. Actually, if Eraserhead is free, he can show you where—"

Mrs. Midoriya looks over and seems to notice him for the first time. Then her attention shifts to the teenagers standing with him.

Shouta happens to glance at Uraraka just in time to see her meet Mrs. Midoriya's eyes. He doesn't recognize that look that they share, but it

probably means they know something he doesn't know, and should.

Mrs. Midoriya turns back to the receptionist. "Thank you very much. Those two are my son's friends—could I take them back with me?"

"Ma'am, we're currently only allowing family and law enforcement—"

"I'm his mother," Mrs. Midoriya says in a tone that discourages argument.

"I understand that, but—"

"You look as if you've had a long night," Mrs. Midoriya says.

"Well, yes, but—"

"I've had a very long three days," she continues. "And so have they. Would you like me to sign a waiver? Would that make it easier?"

The receptionist puts up a valiant fight, but Shouta knows a losing battle when he sees one. Mrs. Midoriya turns away with a gracious victory in hand, and beckons to his two students.

"Come along," she says, with a tired smile at them. "It'll make him happy if you're there."

Neither of them need to be told twice. As they join her, talking over each other's gratitude, Mrs. Midoriya brushes them off and turns her exhausted face to Shouta.

"Thank you," she says. "For what you said."

The press conference. It feels as if weeks have passed since then. Shouta nods to her mutely, and Mrs. Midoriya takes his students and leaves.

He shares a brief commiserating look with the harried receptionist, and takes a seat to wait for Tsukauchi.

Izuku is cuffed to the chair again. But that's wrong, he knows. It's wrong and it's a cruel thing for his mind to do, so he thrashes and struggles until he claws his way back to wakefulness again, back to stiff hospital sheets and a white ceiling above and Rei's cold hands clutching his.

But exhaustion won't leave him be without a fight. Again and again

he's pulled under, forced in dreams to return to the warehouse and the room and the threat of encroaching black sludge and All For One's poison words. He flounders and fights, clinging to consciousness like the edge of a cliff, but it crumbles in his sore, tired hands, and he keeps falling.

He stays asleep long enough for the dreams to take him further; the blackness comes, the swirling dark of a warp gate that he falls through. The mask and the voice return to him, consuming the entire world of his nightmare until nothing exists within it but All For One's toxic presence. He tries to find Rei's hands again, so that he has some way to pull himself back out, but he falls deeper and deeper, until he can't tell which way is out anymore.

And then, pain breaks through. Rei's nails dig into his hand, nearly breaking skin until the sting brings him gasping into the waking world again. He can't see the white ceiling anymore, not through the tears. He lies awake, gasping for breath as he cries silently.

And then there are arms around him, and Izuku is wrapped in warmth and softness and the smell of the shampoo his mother uses.

"Izuku, I'm here. I'm here. You're safe, I promise. It's okay. It's okay, I've got you."

He clings to his mother as the tears fall away and clear his vision again. His face is pressed to her shoulder, and when he finally opens his bleary eyes, he sees that she didn't come alone.

Uraraka and Todoroki are here, standing back to give his mother room. And with them—

There's Ms. Morino, and Mrs. Matsuda and Kurosawa from the apartment. There's Hino, and even Ms. Suzuki. There's Tensei. There's Nana.

Nana sees him looking at her, and smiles. "Hey, munchkin. Toshi's at a different hospital, but he's okay. He won, kiddo. We won."

His mother finally pulls away and lets him sit back, then steps away and motions his friends forward.

"Hey, Deku." Uraraka's voice shakes. "Iida, Momo, and Kirishima said hi. Momo did what you asked."

Izuku's next breath trembles on the way in. There are things he wants

to say, but he can't with his mother in the room—especially since he'd need her to translate anyway.

"Your mom knew about what they did," Morino tells him, as if reading his mind.

"I tried to tell her to stop them," Tensei says, looking shame-faced. "All things considered, I'm… kind of glad she didn't."

Izuku taps on the side of his bed, to make sure Mom is looking. He looks to his two friends, lifts his trembling hands, and signs.

"He says, 'Thank you for coming for me,'" Mom tells them.

Todoroki gives him an odd look, and Izuku realizes with a jolt that he's never seen his friend look close to tears before. "Thought you were gonna yell at us," he says quietly.

"I want to." Mom keeps translating for him. She smiles shakily at what he says next. "I'll do it later, when I'm less happy to see you."

This startles a watery chuckle out of Uraraka, and she reaches over to squeeze his uninjured hand. The world goes blurry again.

The next time he wakes up, he gets the feeling that more time has passed than before. He thinks this because Uraraka is gone and Mom is in her place, still holding his hand. She's dropped into a doze, but her hold is firm and warm.

Consciousness slips from him again, and for once Izuku lets it. If the nightmares do come back, then she'll still be there when he wakes up.

Shouta sits in for Midoriya's debriefing the next morning.

Midoriya is dressed and sitting up, arm still fragile but otherwise in one piece. Once this is over, he'll be cleared to go home, and if Shouta has anything to say about it, this will be quick. He shouldn't have anything to worry about, not with Tsukauchi handling things, but Shouta is both unable and unwilling to let go of the protective urges quietly seething within him.

Tsukauchi's first question is simple—*What happened after you were taken?*—but Midoriya doesn't answer.

The thing is, he tries. Shouta can see it. His mouth cracks open, and his breath quickens a little, but no sound comes out. His uninjured

right hand tightens into a fist, and a look of frustration darkens his face. Beside him, his mother keeps her hand on his shoulder.

“He can sign,” she says. “I can translate, if you need.”

“That would be wonderful, thank you,” Tsukauchi tells her, and offers Midoriya a smile. The boy looks uncertain for a moment, then starts answering.

The story is a grim one. Midoriya and Bakugou were kept together, physically restrained and under constant surveillance, for three days straight. They made an unsuccessful joint escape attempt on the first day, which falls in line with what Bakugou said. Most disturbingly, the League’s leader, All For One, took an interest in Midoriya for his quirk and its similarity to All-Might, and made a concerted effort to manipulate him to the villains’ side.

And Midoriya, to Shouta’s retroactive horror, tried his hand at manipulating right back.

Midoriya’s face is stone-blank and exhausted as he describes his attempt to free Ragdoll, and its subsequent failure. He can’t describe the theft of her quirk without stopping and shaking his head.

“It’s all right,” Tsukauchi tells him. “And she’s okay. She was rescued from the facility—unconscious at the time, but I hear she woke up this morning.” Midoriya sits a little straighter at this, eyes wide. “I was wondering, though, about these.” He produces an evidence bag, containing the drives that Yaoyorozu had given Shouta the previous night. “Can you tell me what these are, Midoriya? And how you got them?”

Midoriya’s face goes dark.

His mother stumbles several times as she translates his answer.

“So let me get this straight,” Shouta says quietly, once Midoriya has finished his story. “You played nice with the League of Villains and lied to the face of the most dangerous criminal to ever exist in this country, and got away with their electronic files?”

Midoriya stares at his lap, and nods.

He looks up again at Tsukauchi’s voice. “Midoriya, I have one more question for you, at least for now.” He pauses. “When searching the remains of the facility, we came across—a body. Dental records came

back, identifying him as Dr. Tsubasa Kento." There's a sharp intake of breath from Mrs. Midoriya, and her son stiffens. "We looked into his background, and found that you used to be a patient of his, years ago. Do you know anything about him, or why he was there?"

There's no hesitation. He answers sharply and jerkily, and his face is still angled downward but Shouta can see the pain on his face. Any pity he might have had for the dead man evaporates when he finds out what he did.

"It's my fault he's dead," Midoriya tells them. "I cuffed him to a desk. I wanted to keep him from leaving so he could be arrested. I didn't know All For One was going to blow up the building."

Midoriya Inko's voice breaks as she translates, and she stops to embrace her son.

"Will there be legal consequences?" she asks, her voice muffled.

"Doubtful," Tsukauchi replies. "My quirk lets me detect lies—and yes, it does work with signed languages—and your son has been nothing but truthful so far." He pauses, noting something down. "It would be very difficult to pin blame on either your son or Bakugou-kun for any destruction or injury they caused to villains during their imprisonment. For one thing, the combat authorization that Eraserhead gave them was never retracted. For another, All For One himself is far easier to find guilty. He's… not exactly in a position to defend his innocence at the moment. We'll go through the proper channels. I don't doubt you'll have a great deal of support behind you, after everything that's happened."

Her relief is palpable. Midoriya's face crumples, and he simply nods.

The interview ends shortly after that. Tsukauchi leaves, but Midoriya intercepts Shouta before he can follow suit. Once his student has his attention, he signs again. This time, it's simple enough for Shouta to understand without a need for translation.

"All-Might was taken to a different hospital," he answers. "As far as I know, he's still being treated, but he'll be fine." That he'll be able to return to hero work is highly unlikely, but… that can be left until later. Midoriya deserves to think about himself for a while.

Except…

"Midoriya." His student looks up at his voice. "That burn on your

shoulder. Bakugou told me you asked him to do that to you."

Mrs. Midoriya suppresses a sharp gasp. "Izuku, why would—?"

"Is this true?" Shouta asks.

Midoriya nods. He keeps his signs simple when he answers, finger-spelling more words than he probably would normally. *All For One had enough quirks to bring us both back if we ran. I stayed to stall them, because they thought they were turning me to their side. I told him to burn me so it'd be more convincing.*

Shouta sighs heavily.

It worked, Midoriya says.

"We'll talk more about that later," Shouta says at length. "For now, go home."

"It's safe, then?" Mrs. Midoriya asks.

"Police and underground heroes will have eyes on your home, around the clock," he answers. "But after a loss like this, I doubt you'll have anything to worry about from the League for a while."

That seems to soothe things, at least a little. Shouta leaves them with a polite nod and a single hospital room number, and moves on. There are other matters that need attention.

His students showing up in places they shouldn't, for example.

Izuku doesn't bother looking at his messages.

They're all from the night of the attack on the camp, and he isn't ready to read messages asking him if he was okay at a time when he wasn't, and wouldn't be for another three days. There's one recent call to All-Might's number from a couple of days ago, and he makes a note to ask Mom about that later.

As they make their way through the hospital, Izuku steals a glance at her. She hasn't said much since they left Aizawa-sensei. Mostly she's just looked… thoughtful.

On his other side, Rei hasn't said much either.

The other ghosts have gone back, but Rei is still here, following him

like a silent little shadow. Her hair hides her face, and Izuku can't guess what she's thinking or feeling. He hasn't heard her voice again since last night. He hasn't even heard the old noises she used to make instead of talking.

His mother seems to steel herself. "Izuku," she says quietly. "There are… there's something I need to tell you, later. And some conversations we need to have. I'm not upset with you," she says quickly, and gives his hand a quick squeeze. "I'm very, very happy you're all right. I'm *proud* of you. You've been so brave. But… we do need to talk about this later. All right?"

This brings a nervous flutter to Izuku's stomach, but nothing more than that. He gives her a weak smile, and nods.

"I-in fact, you may be the one who's upset with me," Mom continues, but falls silent when Izuku jerks to a stop.

He does that because of the hand that catches hold of the hem of his jacket, curling into a small fist until he turns to see who it is.

Kouta stares up at him with wide, watering eyes.

Izuku barely notices Mandalay a few steps behind, barely notes that this is the first time he's seen her dressed like a civilian, barely sees Mr. and Mrs. Izumi close by like they always are. He turns around, bending down to reach Kouta's eye level, and the boy throws his arms around his neck and holds tight.

"You're back." Kouta's voice is muffled against his good shoulder, while Izuku fumbles to return the embrace with one arm. "Y-you're back, and you're alive and—" He breaks off, choking on a pitched sob. "You saved me. E-even though I hit you and yelled at you, y-you saved me and you made me laugh instead of getting scared a-and—and Aunt Tomoko says you t-tried to save her too and—"

"Kouta," Mandalay says gently. Izuku shakes his head at her.

"'M sorry," Kouta says. "'M sorry—you got hurt, because of me, and they…"

Izuku pulls back, and Kouta reluctantly lets go and scrubs at the tears on his face. Izuku looks up at Mom to make sure she's watching, and signs.

Mom smiles down at Kouta. "He says you shouldn't apologize for

things that aren't your fault. It's better to say 'thank you' instead."

Kouta puts on a wobbly brave face. "Th-thank you," he says.

"He was up late watching, when you were rescued," Mr. Izumi tells him. "After he heard you were safe, he finally slept without any bad dreams."

"How come you're not talking?" Kouta asks.

Sometimes when I get scared enough, it scrambles my brain a little, Izuku explains, while his mother translates. *I'll be okay in a little while, promise.*

"Midoriya," Mandalay says cautiously. "I know you probably want to go home as soon as you can, but… Ragdoll's been asking after you. If it's not too much trouble, I think it might do her some good to see you."

"We were just on our way," Mom answers. "Aizawa—Eraserhead pointed the way for us."

"We were getting stuff to drink," Kouta says, wiping his nose on his arm with the sort of brusqueness of someone who wants to pretend he hasn't just been crying. "We're on our way back."

Izuku grins back. *Lead the way.*

The first thing he sees when he steps inside is Tiger. He's hard to miss, and he's still in his battered hero uniform. The next is Pixiebob, half-sitting, half-leaning against the hospital bed as she talks quietly with its occupant.

A small push from Mandalay urges him further into the room, and Ragdoll catches sight of him. Her eyes are red and puffy, like she's only just stopped crying recently, but she smiles when she sees him.

"Hi, kitten."

The world goes blurry. It'll be a cold day in hell before Izuku ever runs dry of tears.

He feels Pixiebob push something into his hands as he walks unsteadily closer, and glances down to see a pen and a piece of paper. He looks up, still teary-eyed, and the heroine gives him a comforting grin. "Mandalay said you might need that."

With shaking hands, he puts the paper on Ragdoll's tray and starts writing.

I'm sorr

His head tingles, and Mandalay's soft voice speaks directly into his mind. *Come on, now, Midoriya. What did you just tell Kouta not to do?*

Izuku dries a fresh wave of tears on his arm, scribbles out what he just wrote, and tries again.

Thank you for saving me.

Ragdoll laughs quietly, and it sounds all wrong. Laughter isn't supposed to sound that sad. "I wouldn't go that far," she says. "From what I heard, you did plenty of your own saving."

He shakes his head vigorously. *You gave me his weaknesses.* His handwriting is terrible, but he wants to get this out as fast as he possibly can.

"Wasn't that much," Ragdoll says softly. "Just a last-ditch effort so I wouldn't just leave you with nothing."

He hesitates, hand shaking, teeth grinding, before writing again. *When he took your quirk, it weakened him. It was like you told me. He couldn't focus. He missed things that were right in front of him. You gave me his weaknesses before you even met him.*

Ragdoll laughs again, voice breaking. "Good," she says, wiping her eyes. "Good, I'm glad—I'm glad if it had to end, I could go out on a note like that."

Izuku glares at her, flips the page over, and writes again.

You'll always be a hero.

She smiles and thanks him, still wiping her eyes, but he can tell she's only humoring him. He circles the *always* several times, until the point of the pen almost digs through the paper entirely.

"Okay, okay, I get the point." Ragdoll squeezes his shoulder. "I'm glad you got out. I'm glad he didn't do the same to either of you. Because—I've seen it, now. Just a little bit of what you're capable of." Her smile widens, taking up more and more of her face until it's almost what it used to be. "Kitten, you're going to be amazing."

Not ten minutes later, Izuku steps outside of the hospital, looks up, and stops in his tracks yet again. The small courtyard out front is crowded—with ghosts, yes, but also with the living. And among the strangers and passersby going about their business, Izuku sees a cluster of faces he recognizes.

Todoroki is the first face he sees, and then Uraraka, Iida, Kirishima, and Yaoyorozu—the group that came to Kamino to find them. And beyond them, it seems as if the rest of his class showed up, too. Even Bakugou is there, looking down and away as he sits squashed between Kaminari and Ashido.

For a few moments he can only stare at them, wide-eyed. He draws in a breath to make one last fruitless effort to say something, even if it's just a bitten-off thank you. Before he or anyone else can make a sound, he sees Todoroki step forward, struggling a little with something in his arms.

Mika lets out a high-pitched, trilling meow as Todoroki lets her down, and keeps meowing as she trots up to Izuku, tail held high and curling. She circles his ankles a few times, then leaps from the ground to his arms. It's only when Izuku's holding her firmly that her meowing turns to a noisy purr.

Something clicks in his mind, as he holds Mika and watches his friends and classmates move in to greet him. It's only when it happens that he even realizes that it hadn't yet until that point—that he has been walking around, living and functioning without quite internalizing the fact that *it's over*, that he is safe again and beyond the reach of any villains, and he can go home and eat real food and sleep in his bed and talk to his friends.

They're all around him, warm and real and happy to see him, as Izuku hides his face in his cat's fur and breaks down sobbing.

It feels a bit like this.

He 'sees' All-Might coming, and rushes to meet him in the middle. The feeling of something dragging at him stays, and it's enough to register in his mind as something outside of the ordinary but it's not enough to hold him back.

There's a blow coming, but—

It never lands.

Instead, the world shifts abruptly, like a train breaking from its tracks, and suddenly the air is different.

He can't see, or hear. He can't feel.

He stays like that for what feels like an eon compressed into a few scant minutes, and then the world returns to him.

All-Might does not.

The blow never lands.

Instead, he's sitting on a surface he doesn't recognize. It's not uncomfortable, far from it in fact, but not knowing exactly where he is and how he got there is quite uncomfortable enough.

He reaches out with his senses, probing carefully, and finds himself in a fairly small room that smells of metal and sanitation and quietly thrums with whirring machinery. There is one other individual here with him, but there must be something wrong with his infra-red vision, because he only knows that because he hears them moving and breathing. Beyond this room, he has no idea.

He opens his mouth, ready to probe for information and gauge his situation, but his companion speaks before he has the chance.

"It's been so long. Would you believe me if I said I missed you?" The voice is odd, awkward and halting like a voice not often used.

(Or, more like, a voice whose owner does not know how it sounds.)

He's speechless for a moment, and then he sighs. "This is quite an interesting trick," he says. "I have to wonder how you found out about that—enough to replicate it, even. I look forward to learning."

Soft, hoarse laughter answers him. "Come on, nii-san. Can we skip this part? I've been waiting a long time to talk to you again."

"I also have to wonder what you're trying to accomplish," he says. "You see, he's dead. He's most likely been dead for longer than you've been alive, whoever you are."

"Of course I'm dead," is the reply. "How else do you think we're talking right now?" He ends the question with something else. Just one word. Just a name.

It's then that his mind makes the switch, that he goes from patient

skepticism to a simple understanding that this is real. There are quirks in existence that deal in minds and memories, capable of reaching into the deepest crevices of the psyche and dragging ugly, squirming things into light. Perhaps such a quirk might have falsified his younger brother's voice.

But there is no quirk that could force his memory to resurrect his own name.

"I see," he says.

He tries to use his quirks. Any of them, really. He cycles through them one by one, but they all seem so far beyond his reach.

"Hm," he says.

"It takes some getting used to," his brother tells him. "I don't know if you'll get your sight back. I still can't hear. I can read your lips, though."

"Where are we?" he asks.

"That's trusting of you," his brother says. "You have no way of knowing whether I'm telling the truth."

"You always were endearingly honest. Such a pity, because you were clever, too."

"True." His brother laughs softly. "We're in a secure facility, in the room where your body is being kept."

"Ah." That would explain the smell, and the smallness of the place. "Then we're still… here?"

"For now." His brother heaves a sigh. "My line of successors have mostly moved on by now, but I stayed."

"Interesting." This had never occurred to him, the idea that there might be more to do after his death. Perhaps he can salvage the pieces of his legacy. Perhaps, in some small way, he can still guide Tomura from beyond the veil. "Perhaps I'm not quite as finished as I first thought."

"Oh, no," his brother says. "You definitely are. No matter which you choose, your path ends here."

Annoyance pricks at him, sharper than it ever did when he was alive.

“Do you think that you have a say, just because I can hear your voice again?”

“It’s not about what I want,” his brother answers. “It’s more about what the others want.”

This gives him pause. “…Others?”

“Nii-san,” his brother says patiently. “What makes you think I’m the only one who’s been waiting for you to die?”

For a moment, the small room seems just a bit colder than before. His senses are dulled in death, the quirks that sharpened them no longer answering his call. And yet, it seems as if the walls are creeping closer. *Fear,* he realizes distantly. He had forgotten what that felt like.

“The old stories are true, you know,” his brother says. “The more painful and violent the death, the more powerful the ghost.”

“I see.” With that drop of knowledge, the fear is beaten back. “This is good news, then, considering the nature of my death.”

The room is quiet for a moment. Then—“Oh.” His brother sounds surprised. “Oh, you aren’t dead yet.”

“…What?”

“You aren’t dead,” his brother repeats. “But you’re never going to be alive again, I’m afraid. It wasn’t All-Might’s blow that killed you, as it happens. The life support in your helmet malfunctioned at the last minute—shut down your brain functions. You’re still on life support, technically, but you aren’t going to wake up again.”

“I… I see.” There must be a way around this. Isn’t there? Doesn’t he always find a way?

“They’ll be keeping you alive,” his brother continues. “You’re a biological marvel, given the nature of your abilities.. Apparently they believe there’s still much to be learned from you. But eventually it’ll run out, or their funding will run out, and they’ll give you something that I’ll bet you never thought you’d have.”

No—

“A peaceful death,” his brother says. “You’ll die in your sleep, surrounded by family. Deaths like that never leave much of a ghost

behind."

"And then what?" he asks. "What happens after that?"

"That's where your choice comes in," his brother says. "You can try to stay in this world. You can try to leave this room. You can meet all the souls who are waiting for you just outside."

He doesn't need to breathe anymore, but it still hisses through his clenched teeth.

"I convinced them to stay there, by promising to tell them the moment you finally died. But I'm not always honest, because that can very well be a lie, if you choose the other option." He pauses. "We can leave, when you die. We don't have to go anywhere special to do it. We don't even have to leave this room to leave the world."

Hands clasp one of his, cold and slender but strong. He tries to pull his hand back, but he doesn't try nearly as hard as he could.

"Come with me," his brother says. "You've been here too long. And I know it's hard to be honest with yourself, especially for someone who lies so well as you do, but you know that this world isn't yours anymore. It hasn't been for a very long time. *Come with me.*"

"Merciful, aren't you?" he says. "You spent a lifetime fighting against me, hating me and everything I stood for. And if you really have been waiting for me, then you've seen all the things I've done while you've been gone. Why would you try to help me now?"

"Because this world isn't mine, either," his brother says. "There is nothing for me here—nothing but you. I can't say whether or not you deserve what's waiting for you outside this room. I can't say whether or not it would help their pain to make you suffer." His voice catches, and he pauses. "But you're all I have left, nii-san. We're all we have left."

The hands release him.

"But, like I said. You aren't dead yet, and you won't be for a while yet, not until they're done with you. You have plenty of time to think about your choices, and decide what you want and what you're willing to risk."

His brother's voice sounds farther away, as if he's settling himself into a far corner to wait.

“Take your time, nii-san. I can wait a little longer for you.”

Chapter End Notes

CW: dissociation, panic attacks, hospitals, aftermath of trauma, PTSD symptoms, nightmares, brain death/life support (villain).

Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

As always, this story has a TV Tropes page!

Loads of art in the notes below! I got so much I had to split it between the top and bottom notes.

Chapter Notes

cricketmilk 2

amodwithoutamark

eternalglitchdraws

battlereadybabe

illusionarypandemonium

narwhalsarefalling

fingerspellingtopassthetime

smolboideku

thisredshrine

emptyinkbottle

charenn1e

irene-draws

hauntedustghost

sprytfrysker

sataniasblog

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When he gets home, Izuku watches the news but cautiously.

It's impossible to avoid if he so much as turns on the TV or glances at his phone, but Izuku gingerly dips his toe in, skims headlines as quickly as possible, and shuts off apps or changes the channel the moment things get to be too much. Rei sits and watches with him, and sometimes Ms. Morino and Mrs. Matsuda come in to check on them, and that helps.

He sees recordings of the UA press conference, and has another good cry when he sees what Aizawa-sensei said about him and Bakugou.

And eventually, it all turns to All-Might. Everyone's talking about All-Might's condition, and his retirement.

At a certain point, it's all anyone will talk about.

Izuku turns off the TV and puts away his phone, and goes to find his mother.

She's in the kitchen, wiping down counters that are already spotlessly clean. Izuku makes sure to step loudly enough to announce his presence, and she looks up with a strained smile.

"Are you hungry?" she asks. "It's a little early for lunch, but I could—"

You wanted to talk to me about something, he says. *What was it?*

Her face falls. "Izuku, you don't need to rush. You only just got home, and you've been through so much—"

He doesn't answer, just watches her face until her voice trails off into a sigh.

They sit across from each other at the kitchen table. Mom's hands are folded, and she's looking at them instead of at him.

"The other day—" She starts after almost a minute of thoughtful silence, then stops and starts again. "Yesterday. It was yesterday. Two of your friends came to visit—U-Uraraka and Iida. And, while they were here, well… Rei came home as well."

Izuku looks at her. Rei curls up into an even smaller ball.

"She was upset. I think she'd just found you." Izuku nods; that about lines up with how his day went. "And—and she made a bit of a fuss, while your friends were here."

Izuku's blood runs cold. *How big of a fuss?* he asks with shaking hands.

Mom's mouth tightens, and she answers, "Izuku, I think they know."

Izuku stares at the table.

"It was my fault," she says. "I forgot about the pictures on the fridge, and—and I should have sent them out as soon as it started, but… one of your ghosts warned me that they were going after you, and I knew I couldn't stop them, so I… I asked Rei to tell us what she knew. So… at least they wouldn't go in blind. I didn't explain things, and I didn't tell them about your quirk or how you have two, but… but they've seem something. And I could have stopped it, but I didn't." Her voice breaks. "I'm sorry. I know you weren't ready for them to know, and I know you deserved to have a choice, but I just… I'm sorry, Izuku. I'm so sorry."

Izuku… doesn't have a panic attack.

It's a close thing, but in the end he doesn't.

The Todoroki household is explosively loud for a while, and then it is eerily quiet.

It's cowardly, but Shouto spends the first period locked in his room, blasting music through his earbuds to drown out the sound of his father tearing apart the training room in a rage.

He can't scrub the image from his memory, of All-Might standing half-withered and frail in full view of the world. The news is screaming about his impending retirement—ending his career on the highest of notes, the unchallenged number one until the bitter end, burning up his last drop of power in a battle against a living nightmare.

Unchallenged only because (at least from Endeavor's point of view) Shouto didn't have time to challenge him. And now, no matter how hard anyone fights, how strong they grow, All-Might's record will remain unblemished.

Shouto puts down his phone so that he won't give in to the temptation to hurl it across the room. He never cared about surpassing All-Might, only about rubbing his success in his father's face, and then only about leaving his father behind entirely. All-Might has never been a priority for him, at least not for his own sake. And his father was stupid anyway. Maybe he didn't expect to have to wait for a fourth child before he started, but he had to know that by the time any child of his became strong enough to challenge All-Might, the latter would be past

his prime and the victory would be worthless enough anyway.

But now All-Might is gone entirely, when Shouto hasn't even finished one year at UA.

Now everything Endeavor ever did will officially amount to nothing.

Shouto paces his room, feeling caged, but now that the house is quiet, he can't quite summon the nerve to venture out and try to leave. But he wants… something.

It's irritating. There's something he wants, something he might even need, but the feeling is maddeningly vague. He's never been good with his own feelings. He's spent so long suppressing them that he's a novice at identifying them, and it makes times like this so much more frustrating.

He keeps himself sane by texting Iida and Yaoyorozu. It helps; even when they aren't physically present, it helps.

He texts Midoriya as well, but does not expect a reply.

Izuku's friends are giving him space.

There was a bit of an explosion of messages after he got home, but he's replied to exactly none of them, and they seem to be taking the hint. Somehow he manages to gather the courage to check what Iida and Uraraka have sent. They don't mention what Mom says they saw, and he isn't sure whether or not to feel relieved.

He's drowsing on the living room sofa, watching a nature show, when a new message comes in out of the blue. Checking it requires some careful maneuvering, because Mika is draped over his chest and the feeling of her purring is keeping the bad feelings back.

[3:14] Todoroki:

Is it strange that today feels quiet? The news is screaming nonstop but it still feels quiet. Not sure whether it's good or bad.

Izuku reads the message a few times. There's no way he can scrounge together a decent reply to something like that, written or spoken. He

sees the little icon that indicates that Todoroki is writing another text, and waits for it to arrive.

But then the icon vanishes, and no message comes through.

Izuku isn't sure why that's what breaks through his silence. He doesn't write back, because he has no idea what he can possibly say about any of this, especially since Todoroki probably has enough on his plate (*how did Endeavor react to seeing All-Might look like that?*) but that's not the end of the world. Thankfully, he already has a solution in place for when words fail him entirely.

It can't really be called a selfie, because his face doesn't make it into the picture. Instead, it shows him from chin to stomach, dressed in a rumpled All-Might hoodie with his cat curled up on his chest.

He sends it to Todoroki before he can think better of it. And then, because that's awfully unfair, he mass-texts it to everyone in his contacts as well.

A few replies roll in, but no one tries to drag him into a conversation or ask him questions. It's mostly hearts and smiley faces, though Kouda responds by mass-texting a picture of himself covered in rabbits.

But it dies down eventually, and things are quiet until the evening, when another message surprises him.

This one sends him running to his mother to show her. She takes one look at it, and at the silent pleading he knows must show on his face. She doesn't tell him no. She doesn't seem to want to tell him no, either —Izuku only realizes that he expected otherwise when she gives her consent and the relief hits him.

Only a short while later he's breaking ahead of her as the sun sets over Dagobah, eyes fixed on the two figures standing on the beach. He has to slow up at the last minute because All-Might is injured too, and he must be exhausted and in pain with his arm still broken and his injuries barely a day old. But All-Might meets him halfway, and Izuku all but launches himself into his mentor's arms and clings with all the strength he dares.

Somehow they end up kneeling in the sand, and Izuku's voiceless gasping sobs are the most noise he's made since his rescue.

"I thought I'd lose you." All-Might's voice is hoarse, and if Izuku didn't

know better he'd think he was about to cry, too. "My boy, I thought —"

Izuku presses his head to All-Might's uninjured shoulder and shakes his head furiously.

"That was a reckless thing you did, talking to him that way," All-Might says. "That was a foolish, dangerous thing, and I've never been more terrified than I was when I saw you in his reach." He *is* crying, Izuku realizes with a jolt. "I'm sorry, Izuku. I'm sorry I wasn't there when they took you. I'm sorry I couldn't protect you. I'm sorry I let him touch you before you were ready to face him."

Izuku can't remember the last time he was pressed so close to All-Might in his true form. He's been caught and scooped up, had his hair tousled and his stances corrected, but that was all before, when All-Might could gather the power within him and make himself look like what he used to be. But now Izuku's arms are around All-Might's rail-thin body, dangerously close to that twisted scar that took so much from him.

All-Might faced All For One like this. No tricks, no lies, no crocodile tears—in direct combat, blow for blow, All-Might faced All For One with a fraction of his strength. And he's still alive to hold Izuku so tightly that Izuku can almost count the ribs beneath his shirt.

"I wanted to scold you," All-Might tells him. "For taking such a risk when he was close enough to—" He chokes on something, either a sob or the blood in his throat. "But—I don't know—what he said to you. What he did. I'm sorry it took so long for me to come. I'm so sorry, my boy."

Izuku shakes his head again, and frustration turns his tears scalding. He wishes he could answer without having to let go.

But he can't, so he thrusts himself back, just enough that he has room to sign. *It wasn't your fault. You came. I knew you'd come, and you did.*

"I should have been with you from the start," All-Might tells him. "It was a mistake to assume you'd be safe."

I made mistakes too, Izuku answers, pauses to wipe his eyes, and keeps going. *I made so many mistakes, and I don't know if what I got was worth it because nothing ever felt right.*

"I know." All-Might's hands settle against his arms. "I know. A lot has

been lost, and broken, and I don't know if it's more their fault or mine, but—I know this. We're still here, Izuku."

Izuku's next breath hitches and shudders on the way in.

"You're still here," All-Might continues. "You've been so brave, my boy. Whatever mistakes you made, I know you've been brave and clever, because that's who you are. And in spite of everything, you made it through this without breaking yourself to pieces. You're still here, and you're going to heal, and that makes me *so happy,* my boy."

His hands aren't enough to stem the tears.

"And I'm still here, too," All-Might continues. "I haven't been the best teacher. I—I can't seem to stop letting you down. I keep missing things that are important. But from now on, my only goal is you, do you understand?" He pulls Izuku into another hug, gentler than before. "I'll do my best. We both will. I'll make mistakes, but I promise I'll listen—however you need to tell me, I'll listen."

Izuku has never wished more desperately for a voice than in that moment.

"Take your time." Nana's cool hand slides into his hair, a light and comforting touch as Izuku cries himself dry in All-Might's arms. "Whenever you're ready, kiddo."

He isn't ready, though. He's not sure if he'll ever be ready. But maybe that's not a good excuse anymore.

"Izuku?"

Inko finds him sitting in front of the TV, a controller in hand as he works his way through a stack of his favorite games. He's been at this since last night, when they'd returned home from the beach and he had eventually fallen asleep in the middle of playing *Unravel*. Mika is sitting in his lap, and there must be ghosts watching as well, because he isn't sitting centered in front of the screen.

He pauses the game and looks up.

Inko takes a deep breath. This… will not be an easy conversation. "Can we talk? It's about… school."

Izuku sets the controller aside and turns to face her fully. She sits

beside him.

“I’ve been in contact with some of your teachers,” she begins. “Aizawa-sensei, mainly. And he’s told me that—that there are changes coming, to UA. A-and one of these changes is… on-campus housing.” Her son’s eyes widen. “A-after everything that’s happened, and with All-Might… they want to increase security, and in order to do that, they want to convert UA into a—a boarding school, I suppose.”

Izuku’s eyes never leave her face, but he nods to show he’s still listening.

“And I just—I’m so torn, Izuku!” The tears are coming already. Inko wipes at them, but knows it won’t do much in the long run. “B-because I… I just have to wonder if UA is really the safest place for you, whatever changes they make.”

Her son breathes in sharply and lifts his hands to reply, but Inko shakes her head. “I know this is your dream. I know that… that UA, and being a hero, it’s all you’ve ever wanted, and I don’t want to stand in the way of what makes you happy, I *never* wanted that, but… but ever since this started, it’s just been one thing after another, and I’ve come so close to losing you more times than I can count when *once* should be too many.” She clasps his hands. “Izuku, your happiness means everything to me, but your safety does too, and I… I don’t know if UA can give you that. I don’t know if—if *All-Might* can give you that.”

With his hands in hers, she feels him tense, and spots a split-second spark of anger in his face before it vanishes. He shakes his head furiously and tugs his hands free.

It wasn’t his fault.

“It wasn’t not his fault, either,” Inko whispers, and her son looks away with angry tears in his eyes. “And that’s why I’m torn, Izuku. Because this school is a target, and as your *mother*, I should pull you out. But I can’t just do that, because of—because of this thing with All-Might, and his power, and—” She breaks off, swallowing another explosive sob. “Training to be a hero is one thing, Izuku. But this… doing this, *being* this, it’s forced you to risk your life before you’re ready, more than once, even more than your ghosts ever did. You—you were so happy when All-Might gave you his quirk, and I was happy for you, but I didn’t realize that it would put this kind of target on your back. I didn’t realize that he—that this would drag you into a war that had

nothing to do with you. And I know you care about All-Might, I know how much he means to you, but I can't help but be angry with him for involving you in this, without even—"

Her son's hands close tightly around hers, squeezing until she falls silent and looks him in the eye again. She expects to see anger, or even betrayal, but his face is calm as he holds up his hand.

Wait here for a second.

He gets up and leaves the living room, darting into the hall toward his bedroom. Inko takes the opportunity to compose herself, to dry her tears and take a few deep breaths so that her voice will stop shaking so much. She doesn't want to cry, but it's inevitable. If she pulls him out of school, then he may hate her, he may never forgive her, but is avoiding that worth his safety?

He returns with papers in his hands. He sits back down, looks past her in that way of his that lets her know he's eyeing a ghost, and puts the papers down on the coffee table in front of them. One by one he lays them out, four pages in all, along with a small photograph and a little bag containing a lock of dark hair.

He picks up the photograph and hands it to her.

It's not a face that Inko recognizes, and yet it's familiar anyway. The subject is a little girl with black hair, looking shyly at the camera without smiling. She looks to be eight or nine.

She also looks remarkably like the figure that Izuku used to draw in markers and crayons, from the age of five to the end of elementary school.

Inko looks up, eyes wide, and finds her son watching her with weary understanding.

I found this in the place where they kept us, he says. *When Rei found me, she was afraid and I didn't know why. She led me to the room where these papers were. I think she found it because of her hair. They kept a piece of her, after all this time.*

"This…" Inko whispers. "This is…?"

That's Rei. Her name was Hitomi, but she doesn't like it when I call her that. She doesn't like to remember.

“I-I don’t understand, what was this… why did they have this…?” Her eyes skim over the paper, not quite reading it word for word, but just enough to catch a phrase here and there. Her stomach turns.

Izuku touches her hands again, making her look back at him. *They tortured her,* he says. *And then when they were done, they killed her. She died, and thirty years later she found me, and she’s been with me this whole time.* His eyes bore into hers, begging her to understand. *All-Might didn’t get me involved, Mom. I was already there, when I was five and I first met her. I’ve been involved this whole time, because of her.* He stops to wipe his eyes as his own tears well up. *I know you’re scared. I am too. But I can’t stop now, and it’s because of her. And it’s because of Kouta.*

“Kouta,” Inko echoes. “That was that little boy in the hospital? The one whose aunt…?”

I saved him, Izuku says, so vehemently that he mouths along with each sign. *Me. There was nobody else there but ghosts, and I still saved him. I didn’t run away and escape, I didn’t wait for someone else to come help. A man tried to kill him, and I was the only one who could stop him, so that’s what I did. Do you understand?*

She does. Heaven help her, she does. She remembers something he’d told her months ago, before all of this started, before the danger and fear began, when he’d cried in her arms and said *I can’t save people’s lives. All I can do is talk to them after they’re already dead.*

This argument is dead in the water, she realizes as she fights back tears. She had lost it before it even started.

I saved someone. Because I was there, and I was strong enough. And Mom? He taps her insistently again, until she finishes wiping her eyes and looks again. *I’m only going to get stronger.*

She pulls him into a hug, and he clutches at her just as tightly. “I know,” she whispers, and it tears at her to admit it. “I know you are, and I’m so proud but I’m so scared, Izuku.”

He squeezes his arms tighter around her.

They stay like that for a while, until Inko’s pounding heartbeat eases, and the fear ebbs back to a manageable level.

“Is she still here?” she asks softly. “Rei, I mean.”

She feels him shake his head against her.

“This is *infuriating*,” she whispers. “I want to be angry with that man. But I can’t, because he isn’t the one who hurt you, and he—he helped you find her. Even if he did it in a roundabout way, he—he pointed you in the right direction, without even meaning to.”

A nod, this time. Inko pulls back.

“And I can’t be angry with him, because when I asked, he was honest with me.” Inko sniffles again, drying the last of her tears. “He showed me that secret of his—the one you said you couldn’t tell me. Though… I guess it doesn’t matter, now.”

He must have trusted you, Izuku says.

“Mm.” Inko lowers her eyes, thinking. She’s done so much thinking, lately. “He trusted you first,” she says. “Enough to tell you a truth like that.” She sits back, frowning. Izuku watches her, but doesn’t say anything else. “Izuku?”

He tilts his head to the side.

“You’re brave. You’ve always been so brave, for the sake of others. So…” Shutting her eyes, she steels herself. “So I can be brave too, for your sake. If—if you want to keep going to UA, then… I won’t stand in your way.” Even with her eyes closed, she can hear his sigh of relief. “But I have one condition. And I don’t think you’re going to like it.”

When Inko opens her eyes, her son is looking at her with a wary sort of hope. She takes his hand—the scarred, crooked one—and clasps it warmly.

“Tell him.”

The wary hope shifts to alarm.

“It doesn’t have to be now,” she adds quickly. “Or… or even soon. But… before the year is out, at least. Because if you’re going back, even after everything that’s happened, then that means you’re seeing this through to the end. And that means that so is he.” She squeezes his hand lightly, until he squeezes back. “I didn’t speak to him for very long, but I could tell how much he cares about you. We almost lost him, that night. And I know you, sweetheart. I know it would have broken you up inside, for him to find out… *that way*.” He looks away,

like he knows she's right. "Go at your own pace. Don't force yourself to do it too quickly, if it makes you feel unsafe. But… Tell him."

He doesn't answer. But that also means he doesn't say no.

That afternoon, Izuku is cuddling Mika and picking out patterns in his bedroom ceiling when Morino ducks in, grinning from ear to ear. "Hate to bug you, Midoriya, but you're gonna want to come out and see this."

A moment later, Mom opens the door and comes in. "Izuku? You have some—visitors." Something in the way she says that makes him look at her, confused. Her lips are pursed, but not like she's upset. She looks like she's trying not to smile.

Before he can react, Mika springs to her feet and takes off like an arrow out his door. Mom tries to catch her as she passes, but Mika dodges around her and vanishes out into the hallway. A moment later, something *barks*.

Izuku is off his bed and running out to the living room before either Morino or his mother can get another word out. He isn't sure what he expects, but what he finds are Iida and Uraraka standing by the sofa, with Tensei hovering nearby. Mika circles them excitedly, meowing and racing laps through the room.

The reason for this is that Iida is carrying a dog.

More to the point, it's a very familiar dog, in spite of a few notable differences. When Izuku last saw this dog, it had been painfully thin and filthy, with weeping eyes and swollen tick-covered ears. Now its eyes are bright, its ears are pricked, and its coat is snow-white and fluffy. It looks less like a dog than a small, panting cloud with a black nose and eyes.

Izuku looks at Iida, eyes wide, and his friend gives a sheepish shrug.

"It was sort of my mother's idea," he says, clearing his throat. "After… after Hosu, she thought it'd be good to take my mind off of things, and that perhaps adopting an animal would help, and… well. I remembered. I probably should have asked before bringing her!" he adds quickly. "Considering you have a cat, but… er. Her name is Bell?"

"How're you feeling?" Uraraka asks.

Izuku opens his mouth to reply, hesitates, then runs back to retrieve his phone. Thank goodness for notebook apps.

Mom leaves them to their own devices, and so do the apartment ghosts. Tensei sticks around, and Rei…

He hasn't seen Rei around much. Not since his last talk with his mother. Izuku just hopes she isn't too upset with him.

As soon as they gather on the couch together, Iida carefully deposits the dog in his lap, and Izuku is almost knocked backward by the ensuing faceful of kisses. Mika's a good sport about it, especially with Uraraka giving her attention while Iida apologizes profusely and tries to get his dog under control.

Eventually she settles across Izuku's lap, while Izuku shakes with silent laughter and almost loses his grip on his phone in the process of petting her.

"You look a little better," Uraraka says brightly.

Makes sense, since I've spent almost two whole days not being a hostage, Izuku answers with a wry grin.

He sees Uraraka's smile sadden when she reads it, and tries not to wince as he takes his phone back and deletes the message. He'd meant to lighten the mood, but in hindsight, bringing back his own kidnapping probably wasn't the best way to go about it.

He tries again. *How is everyone? I've mostly had my phone on silent. Sorry.*

"That is perfectly all right!" Iida gestures forcefully, and Bell licks his hand when it sweeps within reach. "It's perfectly reasonable for you to want time to yourself, after everything that's happened. We just wanted…" For the first time, Iida actually hesitates midsentence. He and Uraraka exchange a quick glance.

"We just wanted to check on you," Uraraka finishes. "And bring you a fluffy dog."

There's something in that look they shared—something that Izuku has never seen before. He's not sure if it's good or bad, but it's *there*, and it makes him look closer.

Thank you, he says. *It's been quiet. A better quiet. Peaceful quiet, not*

staring-at-death quiet. I didn't realize I missed people.

This gets another sad smile from them, and Izuku is surprised when it frustrates him. He hides it by carding his fingers through the dog's fur.

"But to answer your question, everyone is fine," Iida replies. Izuku glances to Tensei, and sees the ghost shifting uncomfortably.

Tapping Iida's arm, Izuku holds up his next message. *But?*

Iida blinks at him. "But what?"

What else is there? Izuku asks. *What's wrong?*

"It's nothing to do with you!" Uraraka assures him. "I mean, it's nothing that you have to worry about. Just focus on feeling better, okay?"

Izuku blinks at her, then turns his head and levels a stare at Tensei. He knows he's looking at what seems to be empty air to them, but it's not as if it's the first time he's stared at ghosts in front of people. And besides, if they notice anything weird about it this time, well…

Iida's brother makes a valiant attempt at a poker face, but after a moment he sighs. "There've been some calls from UA. Aizawa, mainly. He found out about your friends' little rescue mission, and… well, he's always been a stickler for the rules."

Izuku's stomach turns.

"And they won't admit it, but they're kind of worried about Todoroki, too," Tensei adds. "He's been quiet lately."

When Izuku looks at his friends again, he finds them following his gaze in vague confusion, and sneaking glances around as well. And there's that look again. Like they're searching for something. Wondering.

They know. Izuku isn't sure how much they've figured out, but it's far more than he ever wanted them to. And worst off, it happened while he was gone, so he doesn't know what they saw or heard.

He pets Bell, grateful that she's calmed down. The weight in his lap is comforting.

The conversation hobbles onward, stilted and awkward. They're all trying, all three of them, but there's only so much they can do when

none of them really want to talk. Or at least, they don't want to talk like this, but talking like they used to is impossible after everything that's happened, and their only other option is to talk about the one thing he knows none of them know how to bring up.

He knows they're trying. He's grateful for it. He's happier with them here than he would be without them. But he's not sure if the distraction is worth the discomfort.

I'm pretty much good on injuries, he types out, when they ask after his shoulder. *I just have to rest my left arm, that's all. But that's only for a couple of weeks at most. I'll be all right in time for school.*

"I'm glad." Uraraka sounds visibly relieved.

"Are you getting enough rest?" Iida asks. "I know that—that troubling things can make it difficult to sleep peacefully."

Izuku almost snorts at this. *Don't I know it,* he types.

"You're having trouble sleeping, then?" Iida asks.

Ye ah but that's nothing new.

Uraraka hums sympathetically. "Is there anything that might help?"

He shrugs. *I don't know. Maybe death? Considering my luck lately, it's bound to happen eventually.*

In hindsight, he's not sure what made him think that was a good idea. He feels the weird looks they give him before he even sees them—so close to how his classmates looked when he joked dryly about drowning in the forest camp's outdoor bath.

It frustrates him, again. It shouldn't, because *of course* that would worry them—he could have died, for real, just two days ago. Iida's already lost someone he loved, and here he is making light of his own possible demise.

Hastily Izuku erases the message and tries again. *Or I could just knock myself out on the headboard or something. Unconsciousness probably counts as sleeping.* He quickly deletes the part about hitting his head before he shows it to them.

To his relief, this does get some grins and quiet laughter out of them. He'll take it.

Still, it's sort of what drives him to the limit in the end. Izuku's back hits the back of couch, head tilted upward to stare at the ceiling. A short huff of a sigh escapes him. There's barely a sound to it, no voice at all, but he knows he can hear the frustration.

"I'm sorry, Deku," Uraraka says. "We didn't mean to upset you. If you want—"

He waves at her to stop, already typing. The sour dread in his gut is only building up and twisting tightly into a knot, but for the first time in—

He's sixteen now. That makes it nine years.

For the first time in nine years, he ignores the dread and pushes forward.

I need to talk to you. I can't talk right now, but I don't know when I'll be able to talk again and I want to get this over with instead of waiting forever.

He looks at them again, makes sure they're paying attention.

My mom told me what happen. You came while I was gone, and you saw and heard some weird things.

Uraraka's breathing quickens. Iida goes still.

I see ghosts. It's surprisingly easy to type it. With how long it's been and how much it still terrifies him, it ought to be harder than that. But it isn't. Maybe it's because they sort of already know, maybe it's because he's faced death and come out still breathing, but it feels like the simplest thing he's ever done.

There's no answer.

You can believe me or not, he continues. *It doesn't really make a difference. The nice thing about facts is that they're true whether or not you believe them.*

Except it does make a difference. Whatever comes out of their mouths next, it's going to make a world of difference.

"I believe you," Uraraka tells him. "After what I saw, it makes more sense than it doesn't."

Somehow, Izuku musters up the courage to look at her. She staring at

her hands, fingers laced together.

“There’s a little girl,” she continues, and his heart skips a beat. “Right? She’s got dark hair, and she’s dressed in… in a little dress? Or a nightshirt?”

It’s a hospital gown, Izuku now knows.

“Her eyes are black.” Uraraka’s hands twist together. “She was in your drawings. Wasn’t she?”

Izuku tries to swallow, but his throat is closing. He nods.

“She led me to you,” Uraraka says. “Todoroki didn’t see her, but I did. Only a couple times, for a split second. But she led me to the right hallway so we could find you.”

Izuku only realizes he’s crying when his hands reach up on their own to wipe his eyes.

“I trust you,” Iida says softly. It’s harder to get a read on him, especially when crying makes his vision blurry. “It may be hard to believe, but *you* aren’t.”

I’ll explain more when I can talk again, he tells them. *I promise. But that’s the important part. Ghosts are real and I can see them.*

They spend the rest of the visit playing with Iida’s dog on the living room floor. Once Mika gets over her initial uncertainties, they get along wonderfully. When it gets late, Izuku is sorry to see them go.

“Midoriya—” Iida turns back one last time, before he leaves. He looks Izuku in the eye, holding his gaze, and for a few seconds they’re in perfect harmony. Iida has a question, and Izuku knows exactly what that question is.

He waits for Iida to ask it, and wonders how he can best answer.

“I…” Iida hesitates again, throat bobbing. “I… I’m glad. That you’re doing well. And thank you, for trusting us.”

When they’re gone, Izuku lies back on the couch and tries to settle his frayed nerves. He should think about this, he knows. He should think about what this means, and what it will change, and what else he might tell them. But his mind refuses to wrap itself around what just happened, no matter how hard he tries to make sense of it.

He only expects to lie there for a while and contemplate, and so he's very surprised when he jumps awake in the middle of the night, heart pounding from a half-forgotten dream, with a blanket thrown over him and Mika curled up against his stomach.

A knock at the door comes when Mom is out at the corner store, and Izuku is sitting crosslegged on the couch, game controller in hand. He pauses it and gets up, swallowing his unease, only to jump when Hino appears.

"Heya." His hair is still white; he hasn't reverted to his other appearance. "That's just Shouto at the door, in case you were worried."

Izuku nods gratefully and goes to let him in.

Todoroki looks… bad. Izuku knows he's probably not one to talk, but Todoroki always looks so put together, composed, and in control. Even during the Sports Festival, when he was struggling with himself, when he was trying to be an enemy before they figured out they could be friends instead, he didn't look quite this bad. He looked sad, but not run-down.

Right now, Todoroki looks like he hasn't slept much either.

He opens his mouth to say something, but Izuku is already standing aside, offering wordless permission to come in.

"Sorry for intruding." Even his voice sounds rough and tired.

Back in the living room Izuku picks the controller back up and starts to scroll down to exit the game. He isn't prepared for this, for another afternoon of paper-thin brave faces and awkward, stilted conversation, but he can deal with it. He's missed Todoroki. He might be tired, but he's still happy to see him, and that's worth the effort of dragging one side of a conversation out of himself.

Todoroki stops him before he can start turning everything off. "You don't have to," he says quickly. "Like I said, I… I don't want to intrude. It's just… I don't—" He stops. "I don't know. You don't have to do anything for me. I just don't want to be home right now."

Izuku's attention snaps back to him, and he finds himself scanning Todoroki for fresh injuries. When he finds no sign of any, his eyes flicker to Hino instead.

“Bastard hasn’t touched him, if that’s what you’re worried about,” the ghost tells him. “Hasn’t hardly looked at him, either. But he tore up his own training room the other day, and he’s been in a mood. Can’t blame the kid. It ain’t exactly a pleasant place to be.”

Izuku nods, scoots a little closer to Todoroki on the couch, and continues the game.

And it’s… not bad. It’s even a little easy. He half-expects awkward, uncomfortable silence, but it’s not, because he can tell that Todoroki’s watching the screen and paying attention instead of sitting around bored. The combination of Todoroki’s presence and *Ori and the Blind Forest* keep the stress and tension from stirring up.

During a lull in the game’s action, his phone vibrates. He checks it, and finds a new text from Todoroki. Izuku glances at his friend, gets a noncommittal shrug in return, and reads it.

[12:18] Todoroki:

You look awful.

In spite of himself, Izuku snorts softly.

[12:18] Me:

You’re one to talk.

He gets as far as the next place to make a save point before his phone buzzes again.

[12:22] Todoroki:

I’m not the one who looks like he got hit by a train.

This time, Izuku rolls his eyes before he answers, *How sure are you about that?* He snatches a quick look at Todoroki, just in time to see him roll his eyes.

[12:23] Todoroki:

Don't exaggerate. I got hit by a truck, at most.

[12:23] Me:

Wow I can't believe we're both fucking dead.

[12:24] Todoroki:

Such a tragedy. I'm sure we'll be missed.

At some point, Izuku pauses the game again and turns his full attention to texting Todoroki while sitting so close he's almost leaning on him. It's ridiculous, it makes no sense, Todoroki's perfectly capable of talking, but somehow the absurdity makes it easier.

[12:26] Me:

This sucks. If I'm dead then why am I still so tired?

[12:27] Todoroki:

Good question. Whoever said 'I'll sleep when I'm dead' was an idiot. Anything I can do?

[12:27] Me:

Just chloroform me. Put me out of my misery.

Todoroki purses his lips at this, and for a moment Izuku thinks he's gone too far again before his reply comes in.

[12:27] Todoroki:

That's hard to come by. I can find a big stick? Would that help?

Izuku laughs.

Well—almost. He certainly tries his best. His voice still won't obey him, but he manages a sharp, breathless wheezing that comes pretty close to the real thing. It's the most noise he's made recently outside of crying.

And maybe that's what breaks through what little pretense he has left. It's not much, just a thin front over a writhing mass of not okay, but it's held up pretty well until now, and that's probably why his next message is a lot less of a joke.

I hate this.

He looks at Todoroki's face, bracing himself for the inevitable mood-darkening worry, but his friend just watches him with a neutral expression, and he takes this as permission to continue. And once he does, it's hard to stop.

I hate that I'm like this. I hate that All-Might won and we escaped but it's still not over and sometimes I might as well still be there.

I'm still scared and I can't sleep and I can't talk and I can't do anything without making everyone around me feel worse.

He can't hurt me anymore, but he's still doing it. Even when he's a vegetable he's still screwing me over.

Somewhere down the line, he blinks and realizes he's scowling through tears.

I hate that all of you were stupid enough to go near that place but I can't even be mad at you because I don't know what I would've done if you hadn't been there. I'm so happy you came for me and I also hate that you

were there.

The urge to throw his phone across the room comes and goes, and he puts it down instead and scrubs at his streaming eyes.

Beside him, Todoroki is silent for a long time. And then Izuku's phone buzzes, again.

[12:35] Todoroki:

I wish I'd been there with you and I'm also glad I wasn't. I don't think it's supposed to make sense.

Izuku's hand fumbles over another message. *I'm sorry I broke your wrist. I didn't mean to hurt you. I was afraid they'd pull you in too, or the portal would close and you'd lose a hand.*

"I wish I had." Todoroki's voice startles him, for all that it's low and quiet. Izuku jerks his head around, eyes still damp and watering. "That would've been better. Would've been comforting. At least it would've meant I held on." He sounds like he did back at the hospital, when his voice trembled like he was about to cry. "It would've meant I *had* to lose a hand for them to take you. But I didn't."

Izuku latches on to Todoroki's arm and pulls, drawing him closer, sick with the realization that Todoroki isn't about to cry anymore—because he *is* crying, and Izuku's never seen that before.

"*I let go.*" Todoroki's voice rasps, broken and shaking along with the rest of him. Izuku hauls him into a hug, hoping against hope that he isn't overstepping. He feels Todoroki's arms around him, tightening until it's almost painful, and Izuku squeezes back as he feels his shirt dampen at the shoulder.

It's not his fault, it's never been his fault and Izuku was never stupid enough to blame him, especially since he was the one who made him let go in the first place. But even if he could say that out loud, he knows Todoroki wouldn't believe him.

"I'm sorry I let go."

I'm sorry I made you, Izuku thinks, even though it's a lie that Todoroki

can't even hear.

They stay that way until Mika comes, wriggling in between them insistently until they separate to accommodate her. Todoroki's eyes are red-rimmed but dry, and Izuku feels as if he's found something he's missed. He's not sure it's taken care of, but it's there, at least. It's out in the open so it *can* be taken care of.

Inko comes home to find her son sitting quietly in front of one of his games, leaning up against Todoroki Shouto's side. Izuku is playing and his friend looks to be dozing, and Mika naps while stretched across their laps.

Whatever remained of her misgivings about UA are gone now. Seeing All-Might weeping while embracing him, seeing two of Izuku's friends bring a dog to cheer him up, seeing a third in front of her quietly keeping him company, she can't think it's a good idea to pull him away from them anymore.

She can't take him away from people who love him just as much as she does.

Chapter End Notes

(CW: aftermath of trauma, selective mutism, discussion of past torture and murder of a child, coping through dark humor, discussion of child abuse/unsafe home

befuddledbun

occultmdp
anonymous

etsukow

rootbeerdoodles

blueseaanraingirl

eggzumii

peachie5000

nootthecreator

naomi-rose-artz

ofnothingrandom

extraaterrestriaal

ikari

theninjathings

retrowolfdog

musicaddictsloth

sorryimshythings

Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

Thanks for all the art, guys!

vivi-set-this-on-fire

amodwithoutamark

irene-draws

minkidoodles

etherealtulip

twilight-paws

emissary-architect

thekittenkraken

fandom-trash29

nerdismysafespace-01

sketchasylumrue

battlereadybabe

iiryebreadii

thishazeleyeddemon

danosphere91

As always, this story has a TV Tropes page!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shouta's thoughts are not in a pleasant place at the moment.

There are a wealth of reasons, but the main source of his troubles is the list of names and addresses before him.

Somehow, he's supposed to go around to each and every one of these families, and convince them to entrust their children's safety to him even further than before, in spite of his previous failures. Frankly it's a miracle that he hasn't gotten any calls from parents demanding to pull their children out of U.A. entirely. He at least expected something from Midoriya or Bakugou's families, or Jirou's since she was injured in the attack. But he hasn't. To his knowledge not even Sekijirou has, and most of his kids ended up in the hospital.

Still, passive forgiveness is one thing. Asking for further trust is another entirely.

"It'll be fine, Shouta." Yamada nudges his chair with his foot. "We all saw how you did at the press conference. You handled it, and these are concerned parents, not tabloid journalists trying to trip you up with 'gotcha' questions."

“Just because they won’t be doing it for money doesn’t mean they won’t still be looking to blame someone,” Shouta says flatly. “Making house calls means making ourselves easy targets.”

“True.” Yamada shrugs, turning this way and that in his swivel chair. “Could be worse. Most of Blood King’s students ended up in the hospital, so. More scared parents for him, y’know? At least it’s only Midoriya and Bakugou’s families, plus maybe Jirou’s—”

“Not Midoriya’s, actually,” Shouta says.

Yamada pauses mid-spin. “Oh?”

“All-Might called dibs, don’t ask me why,” Shouta replies.

“Even better. Single parents tend to be more protective anyway.” Yamada resumes rotating in his chair. “Anyway, besides them, the hardest family to deal with will be Iida’s. And Todoroki’s, maybe—haven’t heard much from Endeavor lately, but apparently he’s been fit to be tied.” Shouta’s expression darkens, and Yamada must see it, because he stops again. “What’s that look for? Don’t tell me Endeavor’s got you worried.”

He doesn’t, actually. Shouta has never liked Endeavor nor cared much about the man’s opinion of him, so that isn’t the problem. Truth be told, there isn’t really a problem at all.

He just doesn’t like to be reminded of Iida and Todoroki’s part in all of this.

Not just them. Yaoyorozu, Uraraka, and Kirishima as well. It took a while for him to gather all the facts, to consolidate excuses and half-truths and vague surveillance images and wildly conflicting accounts into a clearer picture of exactly what happened. And what happened was this: five of his students stepped onto the battlefield in Kamino Ward without license or authorization, placing themselves into the line of fire after narrowly escaping death just three days earlier. To make matters worse, most of the rest of his class probably knew about it, and did nothing.

It leaves a foul taste in his mouth, knowing that his students broke the law, that for their actions expulsion is entirely justifiable. It’s something he has to consider, something he has to think carefully about, weighing options like hearts against feathers, so soon after dismissing Mineta. Had circumstances been different, he would have done it in a heartbeat. Hell, he probably could have justified the same

punishment for the classmates who let them go. It wouldn't be the first class of hopefuls whose dreams he had dashed. It probably wouldn't be the last.

But the circumstances are this: All-Might's time has ended. The Symbol of Peace is a man once more. The system was already fragile, the world balanced upon a single pillar, and now that pillar is gone and their only hope is to rebuild their supports on the way down, and hope they don't crash and burn. The world now needs heroes more than ever. It's a heavy thing, weighing the laws that hold the world together against the people who will grow up to uphold them.

Can they be trusted to uphold those laws, when they've already made the conscious decision to break them?

"Well, try not to worry about it too much," Yamada says, unaware of the mess in Shouta's head. "You'll just make yourself grumpy, and that's the last thing you need—hello, what's that?"

There's a knock at the door to the faculty office, quiet and politely brief. Shouta grunts, still working out a schedule and order in which to conduct home visits, so Yamada's the one who goes to answer it. He hears the door open and Yamada's voice chirp out a cheerful greeting, but doesn't look up or tune back in until Yamada calls his name.

"Hey Shouta, look who it is!"

He turns his head, half-listening, until he catches sight of Midoriya Izuku in his peripherals.

It's been a full week since Shouta last saw him, and he looks… objectively better. He's standing straighter now, instead of hunched and small like an insect curling behind a chitinous shell. There's color in his cheeks, his hair is about as brushed as it's ever looked, and a little bit of the haunted light has left his eyes.

But Shouta knows he's not where he used to be yet, and the point is only hammered home when Izuku signs a greeting.

Strangely enough, it's comforting to see him. In the midst of his grim thoughts, over passing judgment on so many of his students' futures, it's a relief to see one of the few students who aren't in any danger of wrongdoing or expulsion.

"Midoriya, what brings you here?" As Shouta speaks, his eyes fall upon the small folder tucked under his student's arm. Instead of

answering, Midoriya crosses the distance between them and slides the folder onto his desk. There's a note on it, scribbled in Midoriya's spidery handwriting.

I took these from the villains' hideout. I forgot I had them in my pocket until later. Shouta opens the folder and finds four creased and wrinkled pages of what seem to be research notes, along with a small bag containing a hair sample. A light tap on his shoulder makes him look at Midoriya again, just in time to see him start signing.

"He says he wasn't sure who to give it to, so he figured you could pass it along to the right person," Yamada pipes up. Midoriya's head whips around, eyes going wide with shock, and Yamada grins. "Yeah, I know sign. I'm better at it then him, too."

"Yamada," Shouta says flatly.

"What? I am. I can totally translate so the kid doesn't have to dumb it down for you." Yamada glances at Midoriya, who looks thoroughly bewildered by it all. "Unless that was all you needed?"

Midoriya hesitates.

Shouta can see the look on his face, and guess what it means. It's the kind of hesitation that means that no, there is something more he needs, but he's mentally weighing how important it is against how much he'd like to avoid inconveniencing anyone. It's well-meaning, certainly, but also misplaced.

"Midoriya, considering recent events, I'd much rather you say what you need than not."

Midoriya shoots him an uncertain look, glances back at the door, and takes a deep breath to steady himself.

It's not the first time Yamada's had to translate for someone, and Shouta knows it's about the only thing that can make his voice softer and more sedate. It makes it easier for Shouta to ignore him, tune him out, and focus on the person who's actually doing the talking.

"Are the others going to be in trouble?" Midoriya asks him, and the relief is promptly gone.

Shouta sighs and doesn't answer right away, which is probably enough of an answer on its own, judging by the way Midoriya's face falls.

“Midoriya—”

“I don’t want them to get in trouble for helping me,” Midoriya cuts him off.

“They broke the law, Midoriya,” Shouta says flatly. “They broke several laws.”

“They did it to save me,” Midoriya says, and his nervous expression is morphing into a hard-set frown. “They didn’t try to fight any villains, they didn’t get in the way of any of the heroes, and they saved me. They saved Bakugou, too.”

Shouta wonders if it would benefit him to know that he’s outlining exactly what makes this dilemma so difficult. If they’d attacked a villain, if they’d hampered rescue efforts, it would be such an effortless decision to make, and yet—

“Where is the line drawn, Midoriya?” He’s not sure why he asks. It’s not a question he’s been able to answer, not in the past week nor in the entirety of his career. “Where’s the line between a good and a bad reason to break a law?”

Midoriya looks away. Not at Yamada, or at the door again, but off to the side and at his own feet. Shouta knows why. It’s an infuriating question. He’s tired of having to ask it, knowing that it’s only going to keep coming back, and he can tell right now that it’s a question that Midoriya will be wrestling with, too.

“That’s a stupid question.”

Shouta’s eyes flicker back to his student, and he finds the boy glaring at him.

“There’s no line,” Midoriya says. “That’s like… asking for an easy answer. So you don’t ever have to think about it.”

Shouta sighs.

“Aizawa-sensei, I know they broke the rules, I know rules are there for a reason but…” Here he can see Midoriya stumble, hands wavering. “I was alone. And I was—I didn’t know what to do. Nothing made sense anymore, and I was alone, and then… then they were just *there*. And suddenly I could see the path ahead of me again. They broke the rules but they saved me and doesn’t that count for something?” Each sign is short and choppy, and if he were using his voice, he’d probably be

raising it.

“It could have gone much worse than it did, Midoriya—” Shouta begins.

“But it didn’t.”

“And under normal circumstances, the consequences for their actions would both *severe* and *final*.” These aren’t normal circumstances, of course, and that’s where all the trouble has been coming from.

Midoriya doesn’t answer right away. He’s staring at Shouta, still glaring, but his eyes widen as he realizes what Shouta is saying. “You’re talking about expulsion.”

“Midoriya—”

His student interrupts him one last time, with a light knock to the surface of his desk. Shouta considers ignoring it and continuing to speak, but he can tell that Midoriya has something to say.

“I need you to understand, that… this isn’t an attempt at a threat,” Midoriya says. “It wouldn’t be much of one anyway, so it’s just the truth.” He hesitates, blinking hard as he steels himself to continue. “If you expel any of them for what they did, then I’ll be walking out that door too, right behind them.”

This part is what makes Yamada stumble over his translation. Midoriya says it’s not a threat, but it kind of is, and Shouta can tell that it’s not an empty one.

Midoriya’s eyes never leave his. “Because if you did, then it would mean that my goals and the school’s just… don’t line up. It would tell me that you care more about following rules than protecting people, and Sensei, I’ve had teachers who felt that way all my life. *I don’t need one more*.”

His eyes are steady and unblinking, burning with quiet vehemence, and this feels familiar to Shouta but he can’t place why—he never can.

All in all, Bakugou’s family is a lot more accepting of things than expected.

As Toshinori predicted, they mostly have Aizawa to thank for that. He’s seen video of the press conference, of how viciously the press

attacked the boys, and of Aizawa's equally ruthless defense of both of them. Bakugou's parents are grateful. Toshinori himself is grateful. For all that Aizawa rightfully claims to hate the press, Toshinori can't help but feel that he handled that much more efficiently and effectively than even All-Might could have. If anything, that aversion to the media is probably why; the journalists and their questions were hard-hitting, and Aizawa was angry enough to hit back.

Through it all, Bakugou himself is strangely quiet. Toshinori catches the boy sneaking looks at him, as if there's something he wants to know, or something he wants to ask. He had been on the battlefield—the other villains had been surrounding him, but perhaps he had caught sight of Izuku standing near him and All For One. Perhaps he's wondering what was said.

In the end, for all that he seems to want to, Bakugou asks him nothing. Midoriya is next on their list.

"You're sure about this?" Aizawa asks.

"Any particular reason why I shouldn't be?"

"I visited Mrs. Midoriya the day after the attack. Something about her demeanor gave me the impression that I was lucky to leave that apartment alive."

Toshinori almost snorts at this. "I appreciate your concern," he says. "But it really is necessary that I do this alone."

"If you say so." Aizawa shrugs and sits back. "You know, most of the staff are convinced there's some tangible connection between you and Midoriya."

"Is that so."

"I told Yamada you were planning on taking care of this discussion with Midoriya's mother personally, and I'm pretty sure he's convinced half the faculty that it's a family matter to you."

Toshinori coughs until he tastes copper in the back of his throat. "If I could be so lucky," he rasps, and leaves the car before Aizawa can respond.

He knocks before he has the chance to lose his nerve. They know he's coming, and he's not likely to surprise them.

Midoriya Inko answers the door, looking… decidedly less unfriendly than he feared. She seems… civil. Not quite cordial, but definitely not cold. He supposes that it must be difficult to be unfriendly to him, the way he is—battered, broken, bandaged, and still healing. In any case, Mrs. Midoriya smiles as she admits him, and it puts him more at ease before he steps inside.

Past that threshold, he's seized with a strange sensation not unlike the familiar chill up his spine that has saved his life countless times before. It's a bit like foreboding, but not quite as ominous. It's not a threat of danger, no; it's more a sense of enhanced awareness, a distinct feeling of *not alone*.

Odd, he thinks. *Of course I'm not alone. I never expected to be.*

He can hear sounds from the television as he slips off his shoes. Mrs. Midoriya walks ahead of him at a brisker pace that he's probably not meant to match, because she enters the living room several steps ahead of him and knocks softly on the wall.

"I hate to interrupt," he hears her say. "But it's time, and I believe this is meant to be private. Izuku, if you could—"

It's at this point that Toshinori catches up to her, and he blinks in surprise when he sees not one, but two of his students seated on the sofa, glancing up from a paused video game that Toshinori can't identify.

He was hardly expecting to find Todoroki here of all places, and yet here he is.

Young Todoroki blinks at the sight of him, and his eyes shift up and down and back again, as if taking in Toshinori's appearance one piece at a time. It's hard to bury the instinctive alarm, the habitual urge to duck away and transform, but—well, that's impossible now.

This is the first time any of his other students have seen him, up close, in his true form.

"Hello, young Todoroki," he says, when the silence gets to be too much. Something like sadness is stealing into Todoroki's eyes, and Toshinori wants nothing more than to dispel it. "It's good to see you're well."

Todoroki gives him an awkward little nod. "You too." His eyes flicker toward Mrs. Midoriya. "I can go, if you need?"

Beside him, Izuku waves for his mother's attention and signs. Toshinori catches *Do you need me?* even though it goes by quickly.

"No, that's all right," Mrs. Midoriya replies. "I can handle this myself. It won't be long, I promise."

Izuku nods, bounds up off the couch, and turns off the TV and the game system. Todoroki barely has time to shoo the cat out of his lap before Izuku tows him out of the room by the arm. A few moments later, Toshinori hears one of the doors in the hallway open and close, and then quiet.

"He won't overhear anything from Izuku's room," Mrs. Midoriya assures him, after inviting him to take a seat. "In case you wanted to discuss anything sensitive. Sorry to worry you."

"It's all right," Toshinori replies. "I just wasn't expecting… er. My other students… it's sooner, than I thought." His voice trails off briefly. "Though this is probably good, to prepare myself."

"I see…" She looks sympathetic. "Still, I'm sorry about any inconvenience. I didn't want to turn him away when he came to visit. His father's been busy lately, so he might be getting a bit lonely, and… it's good for Izuku, I think." She shakes herself. "But that's not what you're here to talk about, is it?"

Toshinori nods. "You've heard already, I assume?"

"Yes, and before we continue—" Mrs. Midoriya glances in the direction of the hallway, and presumably her son's room. "My son may not be present, but whatever you say here should be things you're all right with him hearing. I'm not about to hide things from him that concern him."

"Of course," Toshinori agrees readily. "It's nothing too sensitive, for the most part. I'm mainly here to discuss the possibility of young Izuku moving into the school's new on-campus housing." He pauses. "And of course, given the, ah, unique nature of his abilities, and my… my connection to him, I thought it best that I conduct this meeting myself." He braces himself for her answer. She has been civil and welcoming, but that does not necessarily mean she will say yes.

Mrs. Midoriya takes a deep breath and lets it out as a quiet sigh. "I had reservations," she says bluntly. "I hope you can understand why. I came very close to losing him. I spent three days not knowing if he would come back to me alive. And…" She raises her eyes to meet his,

just for a moment. “Then there’s your ‘connection’ to him, and the fact that you expected him to keep it from me.”

“For what it’s worth,” Toshinori says quietly. “If he had told me he intended to confide in you, I would not have stopped him. I would never have discouraged him from telling you.” He hesitates. “On the other hand, I also didn’t encourage him to tell you, either. And that was—I should have done things differently, in that case.”

“Mm.” Mrs. Midoriya nods. “I’ve discussed things with Izuku. I brought up the possibility of pulling him out of UA.” Toshinori’s heart seizes, but he says nothing. “He was against it, of course. We had a long talk, and I’ve done some thinking, and… if I did that, I would only hurt him. In fact, it would hurt him too much to justify, even with his safety on the line.” Her voice shakes and cracks, and she passes the back of her hand over her eyes. “I don’t know that he’s been safe there, or as safe as I’d like, but he’s been *happy*. For the first time, he has friends and he has teachers who care about him, and school is something he looks forward to. I’ve seen his friends so many times over the past week, checking on him and cheering him up and making sure he’s all right, and I can’t take that away from him. And…” She purses her lips. “I said before that I would trust you. And I did. And Izuku came home to me alive. So, in spite of my fears, and in spite of everything… I suppose I have no reason not to keep trusting you.” Her eyes rise to meet his again, and just for a moment Toshinori glimpses all the fear and desperation of a mother who came so close to losing her child. “Please don’t make me regret it.”

Before he even realizes he’s risen from his seat, his knees are already meeting the carpet. The space is suddenly too small as he gathers the fumes of his strength and forces a transformation for the first time since his battle with All For One. It’s no good; a few seconds later he loses it again, leaving him weak and shaking as he prostrates himself before her, swallowing blood and bile so he won’t stain the rug beneath him.

“I give you my word, you won’t,” he says. “I may not have much power left, but I swear to spend every drop of it raising him into the greatest hero he can possibly be. I will teach him, I will guide him, I will protect him, and if need be, I will give my life for him. You have my word.”

There’s a soft thud, and Toshinori raises his head to find Mrs. Midoriya kneeling before him, looking at him more closely than she ever has before. The weight of her eyes makes him feel as if he is

having his very soul weighed before him.

“That’s won’t do at all,” she says at last, and Toshinori’s heart sinks before she continues. “My son needs a lot of things from you, but he doesn’t need or want you dying for him.” Her eyes narrow into a frown that brooks no argument. “You *live* for him, do you understand? No matter what. Your death won’t help him. In fact, there’s no crueler way you could possibly hurt him. He might forgive you for it, but I’m not sure I could.”

Pressure builds in the back of his throat, tight and painful with guilt and the weight of his secrets. He never did tell Izuku what his future was supposed to hold. If he had, the woman before him would probably know it, too.

“I…” His voice catches, and he rises so that he’s kneeling instead of prostrate. “I am not in the best of health. But I will do my best to stay alive, for him.”

“That’s all I ask,” Midoriya Inko tells him, as she helps him to his feet again.

Who knows? Maybe he was supposed to die in Kamino. Maybe he missed it.

He can only hope. He wishes he could ask.

It’s eerie, to pack up his life in boxes.

It’s not something Izuku thought he’d have to do—not this soon, at least. Moving out is something he’s supposed to do after graduation, not halfway through his first year of high school. It isn’t permanent, he knows; maybe it will only last until the threat from the League of Villains is gone. But that doesn’t change the fact that he’s sitting in his room, surrounded by cardboard boxes, trying to choose what to bring and what to leave behind.

Most of the posters on his walls come down, to be rolled up and packed. The thought of trying to sleep in a strange room with blank walls makes his mouth dry; if he has to live away from home, then he can at least make things as familiar as possible.

He works slowly, thinking over every decision, stopping to remove Mika from various boxes. There isn’t all that much to take, really. The rooms are already furnished with beds and desks and dressers, so all

he really needs are bed covers, clothes, and personal decorations. He decides to take his game consoles, just in case those are allowed. If they aren't, then he can always send them back. One box he fills with dress clothes, just in case those are needed—you never know. Meal plans are included, but he still packs snacks and his favorite teas.

So absorbed is he in packing that he doesn't hear Mom approaching until she's already setting another box down with a thud. He turns, and Mika trots over to jump up on top of it.

"I packed her bowls, her food, her toys, litter, and one of her little beds," Mom tells him. "You've been doing a good job of taking care of her and cleaning up after her, so I'm not too worried. Just remember to change the litter box, or your classmates might not thank you."

Izuku stares.

"I already made a few calls, to make sure pets are allowed," she continues, scratching Mika behind the ears. "Turns out you wouldn't even be the only one bringing one."

I don't want you to get lonely, he says.

Mom smiles sadly. "I was always going to be a little lonely," she replies. "But I think you'll need her more than I will. Take good care of her, all right? Keep her bowls clean, and call me if she gets sick. I'll let you know when she's due for shots or a checkup, and we can take care of that as it comes—"

Izuku finishes dodging around boxes and hugs her. Her eyes are wet when she pulls back.

"Don't argue with me on this, now," she says. "I'll feel better if she's there to keep an eye on you."

She leaves him to his packing after that, and before long Izuku can hear her in the kitchen, getting lunch ready. It'll be the last lunch she makes for him, before he moves into the dorms.

Tomorrow. He's leaving tomorrow.

His All-Might nightlight is the last thing he needs to pack. It's silly, but again, he needs all the help he can get if he's going to settle into an unfamiliar room. He'll be fine without it for tonight, because he just knows that if he leaves it until the last minute, he's going to forget it for sure.

But when he goes to retrieve it, he finds the outlet already empty. That's odd—did he already pack it up and forget about it?

He searches the floor around it, his bed and his desk, and finally starts re-opening boxes. But the nightlight is nowhere to be found, much to his growing frustration. Part of him realizes that it's silly to get hung up over something so small, that he's going to have trouble adjusting with or without it. But still he searches every box, lifting things out and putting them back in, until he shuts the last one and sighs.

He turns back toward his bed to check the outlet one last time, and finds the nightlight hovering in front of his face, held in a small white hand.

Rei sits crosslegged on his bed, hunched and small as she holds out the light. Izuku takes it, tosses it into a box, and hops up to sit with her. Rei turns to face him, scooting closer until their knees touch.

I missed you, he says.

I'm sorry.

His heart sinks. Part of him was hoping to hear her voice again—though considering his own silence, that might be a little hypocritical right now. *I'm sorry, too.*

Rei shakes her head, and her hair stirs far more than the movement warrants. *You didn't know,* she says. *I didn't know either. I forgot.*

Izuku slips an arm around her and draws her into a one-armed hug.

I forgot, and I couldn't protect you, she says. *I couldn't stop them when they took you. It's my fault you were there and it's my fault they hurt you*

Izuku tries to say *no* out loud, but he can only form the silent shape with his mouth. He shakes his head, letting go so he can sign it properly. *No. It's their fault for hurting me, not yours.* She averts her head, and Izuku brushes her long hair out of her eyes until she looks at him again. *And it's their fault for hurting you, too.*

Blackness spills from her eyes like tears, and she presses against him like she's trying to burrow into his chest. Mika hops up to join them on the bed, purring as Izuku lets Rei cry.

I didn't want it back, she says, when she can again. *I don't want any of it.*

Any of what? Izuku asks.

What they did. What they said. I don't want that. I don't want anything from before I found you. Rei shakes her head furiously, pausing only to scrub at her streaming eyes. *I don't want to remember I don't want my life I don't want my name I don't want any of it.*

Izuku's heart twists to see all of it. *You don't want your real name?*

The lamp in his room flickers, and when she raises her head and lets her hair fall away from her face, Izuku can see the skull showing beneath flesh. Her translucent jaw opens, and for the second time, Izuku hears her speak—not quite the plaintive cry it had been before, but something caught between the child's voice and the wraith's rattling snarl.

"*My real name is **Rei**.*" The lamp flickers again, and goes out. "*I'm n**ot Hitomi,** I don'**t want to be Hito**mi. Nobody want**ed Hitomi, they stole** her and they **killed her and n**obody ever lo**oke**d f**or her because nobody mis**sed her. Hitomi h**ad nothing.***"

You have me, Izuku reminds her, fighting back tears. *I would have looked. I would have missed you, I promise.*

Her hair falls still, and her face looks like a little girl's face again. The lamp flickers back on, and she's crying too, fat black tears rolling down her face as she answers with her hands instead of her broken voice. *Rei has you. Rei has a little brother. Rei has friends. But I didn't have that until I was Rei. That's the only name I want. That's the only me that matters.*

Izuku pulls her into another hug, so tight that he has to force himself to be gentler, because even though she's dead and he can't damage her, he might still cause her pain. She hugs back, fingers gripping handfuls of his shirt as he presses his face into her hair.

It's only like that, in the solitude of his room with only a cat and his best and oldest friend to hear, that Izuku can manage it. It's too soon for it to be fixed entirely, but right now—just for a moment—he can manage it.

"*You always matter, nee-chan,*" he whispers into her hair, so softly that he can barely hear it himself. "*I love you.*"

It could be his imagination, but he thinks he hears an *I love you too,* in a child's voice that no one living remembers, that no one living will

ever hear again.

Just him.

Midoriya shows up on move-in day with his cat, and absolutely no one is surprised.

Shouto finds himself moving to stand with him, though he's not sure why. It's not like Midoriya is his only friend in class—he had been holding a perfectly pleasant conversation with Yaoyorozu before spotting him. He just feels a bit more sure of things the closer he is, and while it probably isn't normal to feel like the world's axis is a bit off when he doesn't know where Midoriya is, the solution of standing just a bit closer to him isn't enough of an inconvenience to bother him.

Upon seeing him, Midoriya offers a weak little smile but nothing more, and Shouto gets the sense that his friend still isn't talking. That's worrying, but it's also good to know that his recent efforts won't have gone to waste. Endeavor has been too busy to set foot in the house since the Kamino incident, and it's left Shouto with a lot of time on his hands.

Emphasis on hands.

He nudges Midoriya lightly, and when Midoriya looks at him again, he signs a quick *Good morning*.

Midoriya's hands are too full of cat to reply, but that doesn't stop him from staring at Shouto like he hung the moon.

Time well spent, then. Hopefully Midoriya won't mind being patient with him while he practices.

The mood among their classmates is somber. Of course it is, after everything that's happened, and everything that's changed. Todoroki is somewhat surprised that everyone is still here—even Jirou, who was hospitalized from breathing in the poison gas. No one was pulled from UA or forbidden from staying in the recently-built dorms, but everyone's feeling the weight of things. Bakugou in particular is uncharacteristically quiet, barely acknowledging Kirishima's attempts to draw him into a conversation. And things only dip further down when Aizawa addresses them all.

"In a few moments I'll give you all a quick briefing in regards to the

dorms," he says. "But first…" His eyes sweep the class, pausing exactly five times. Todoroki catches his gaze on one of them. "The original plan was for your to earn provisional licenses after the camp. That fell through, of course, and you haven't gotten them yet—so why were some of you acting like you did?"

The mood turns from somber to tense.

"Todoroki. Kirishima. Uraraka. Yaoyorozu. And Iida." It takes all of Shouto's willpower to stand steady and remain unmoved. "You were all present that evening, at the site of Bakugou and Midoriya's rescue. You took it upon yourselves to interfere with an active rescue operation. Under normal circumstances, I would be perfectly justified in expelling all of you—as well as every one of your classmates who knew of your intentions and did nothing."

Most of the class shifts uncomfortably, and Shouto clenches his teeth, wrestling with his own rising guilt. Of course the possibility of punishment had occurred to him—he'd been prepared for it. But he hadn't realized he might risk dragging the rest of the class down with him.

"In the end, All-Might's retirement prevented me from making that decision," Aizawa continues. "Though, the fact that someone spoke up for you, vehemently, certainly didn't hurt." Beside him, Midoriya shifts so that he's hiding slightly behind Shouto. "But from here on out, I would appreciate it if you all would make an effort to avoid breaking anti-vigilantism laws in the future—if nothing else, as a matter of repairing broken trust." He takes a moment more to watch them, to see if his words are sinking in, before turning toward the building in front of them. "All right then. Let's head in."

The class is slow to follow, the air festering with unease and guilt and low spirits. It's only broken when Bakugou, of all people, grabs Kaminari, drags him a safe distance from the others, and startles him into discharging enough electricity to short-circuit his brain. The resulting stumbling, coupled with the foolish grin on Kaminari's face, sets laughter rippling through the class. The tense mood cracks, and Kaminari's good-natured clowning distracts everyone while Aizawa rolls his eyes and Bakugou pulls Kirishima aside to finally talk to him.

As the class follows Aizawa inside, Shouto turns back to find Midoriya doing his best to hide behind his cat.

"That was you, wasn't it?" he says. Midoriya jumps. "The one who

spoke up? It seems like something you'd do."

Midoriya stares at him, round-eyed. He can't sign with his hands full, so instead he finger-spells, slowly enough for Shouto to follow.

I have no idea what you're talking about.

"Of course," Shouto says, straight-faced.

(He tunes back in to what Aizawa is saying, just in time to see the room allocation chart on display in the first-floor common room. He's in the room at the end of the hall on the second floor. His only neighbor is Midoriya.)

After a quick tour, Aizawa-sensei releases them to unpack their luggage and get settled into their new dorms.

Izuku's first order of business is setting up litter boxes. He brought three, just to be safe; one goes into the laundry room on the first floor, one in his own bathroom, and one in the corner of the second-floor hallway. For now, he puts Mika's bowls in his own room. He might move them once she gets more comfortable around here.

From there, he sets up his own living space. He makes his bed, puts up posters, arranges things in his new desk, and sets up his bathroom. Within just a few hours, everything is in place and Mika is happily lapping water from her bowl.

He opens his door just in time to see Rei zip by, in the midst of exploring. She won't be alone here, either; Hino seems committed to following Todoroki instead of Endeavor now, and Tensei's one floor up with Iida.

Iida.

It's surreal to think about Iida and Uraraka now. They *know* now. He's told them, and in spite of all his fears, they seem… all right with it? Uraraka seems to have accepted it, at least. But Iida…

Iida knows, but he doesn't *know*. And now that Izuku has told him one earth-shattering secret, it only seems right to tell him the next. It makes sense, doesn't it? He has the right to know.

He *deserves* to know about Tensei.

And maybe… maybe on some level he already does. Maybe he

suspects, and he just doesn't know how to ask, any more than Izuku knows how to tell him.

How hard could it possibly be? *Hi, Iida, how're you settling in? Good? By the way remember how your brother's death almost shattered you and sent you down a dark path of vengeance? Well he's still here and he says hi and he saw all of that because he's always watching you. Sleep well!*

And, of course, he'd have to say all of that without talking. He'd have to *text* it to him, for heaven's sake.

The sound of bumping next door breaks him out of his thoughts, and he glances over at the other door with mild concern. That's Todoroki's room; Tokoyami's is on the other side, and he's been fairly quiet.

Izuku goes for his phone to send a quick *Everything okay over there?*

[3:49] Todoroki:
Fine.

[3:50] Me:
I'm done in my room. Do you need help?

It takes a couple of minutes for his friend to reply.

[3:52] Todoroki:
Door's open.

Pocketing his phone, Izuku slips out into the hallway with Mika at his heels. Sure enough, Todoroki's door is ajar, and he nudges it open to see what's making all that noise.

He stops, blinking in astonishment.

"Hello," Todoroki says, barely looking up from where he's kneeling on the floor. "I don't want to bother you, but if your offer was serious, I was just moving some furniture."

Moving some furniture. It looks more like Todoroki's trying to remodel by himself. His furniture has been shoved around, but only to make room for…

Are you putting in tatami flooring? Izuku asks, bewildered. *And why don't you have a bed in here?*

Todoroki blinks owlishly at him. "Sorry. Could you repeat that?"

Izuku does so, more slowly, until Todoroki understands. "Oh. Yes." For a moment, Todoroki—calm, collected, eternally-unruffled Todoroki—looks almost embarrassed. "It's what I'm used to, at… at my parents' place. Japanese style, not Western. It's hard to settle down without it, and I sleep better on a futon than a bed, so I asked Aizawa-sensei ahead of time. He said it was fine if I brought my own. It's more work than I thought it'd be, but… it's hard to settle down without it."

Izuku thinks of the posters on his walls and his All-Might nightlight, and can't help but grin a little. Mika is already making herself comfortable on a tatami mat that hasn't been placed yet, so Izuku steps inside and closes the door behind him.

They finish up hours later, thoroughly exhausted, and neither of them win the impromptu room-decorating contest (turns out neither a DIY remodel nor a pet cat can stand in the face of the homemade chiffon cake that Satou's room offers) but the day ends with Izuku in somewhat better spirits. The prospect of assigned rooms had been a little nerve-wracking, but Todoroki's one of his best friends and Tokoyami's easy to get along with, too, so he could have done a lot worse in terms of assigned neighbors. Satou's cake was delicious, and in spite of all the changes, things are starting to creep back toward normal.

All in all, it's a good end to a good day. He texts his mother and goes to bed satisfied, with Mika draped over his legs instead of in her cat bed. His new bed is comfortable and his sheets are from home. It's a nice room.

It's nice here.

He could have done without waking up in a cold sweat in the dead of night, but that's not something anyone can really control.

Shouto doesn't wake up screaming anymore. He trained himself out of that early—Endeavor is a light sleeper, and noises in the night draw

his attention so easily. And so Shouto awakens from nightmares with a dry mouth and a sore throat instead, and the air around him stirs as the temperature fluctuates.

For a while he sits up in bed, taking deep, slow breaths until his quirk is under control again, fingers curling and uncurling in his comforter. His wrist healed a while ago, but it still feels stiff sometimes.

His phone is in his hand before his brain catches up, and he realizes with a jolt that he fully intends to bother Midoriya with a text at—three in the morning, apparently.

Don't be stupid. He's fine, you idiot. He's in the room right next to yours, and he won't thank you for waking him up when he already gets terrible sleep as it is.

His mouth is parched. They're supposed to have a curfew, but he hopes that a quick trip down to the common room will be all right. It's a little unnecessary if all he wants is a drink of water—each dorm room comes with a fridge and a bathroom, his included—but the walk helps loosen his tightly-wound nerves. An ember in his left hand lights his way down the dark stairwell, and then back up it. No one swoops in and demands that he go back to bed, to his relief. He's not afraid of getting in trouble, he'd just rather no one see him like this.

By the time he emerges from the stairwell on his floor, he's breathing normally again and somewhat dreading going back to sleep. If he has another crawling nightmare, then he'll have to calm himself down all over again—

Glowing eyes flash at him in the dark, and Shouto jumps.

Midoriya's door is open, and his friend sits in the doorway and leans against the frame. His head is turned to face Shouto, eyes glowing eerily in the dim light of the ember. After a moment he turns away again and stares at the opposite wall instead.

He doesn't look any better than Shouto feels.

Shouto reaches his own door and pauses. He glances over at Midoriya, still sitting and staring off into space in a dark hallway at three a.m., no doubt in for a terrible morning when he actually has to get up and function. Shouto almost feels stupid for having nightmares. He only saw a fraction of what Midoriya went through, the tail-end of one evening after three days—

He realizes that his pulse is up again, and he's not calm anymore.

Midoriya turns his head to look at him again, as if sensing him staring. The glow in his eyes winks in and out of view as the angle changes.

The decision is quick, easy, and uncomplicated. Shouto opens his door and steps to the side. He doesn't speak—neither of them do—but he hopes the invitation is clear.

Midoriya stares at him for a moment more, then climbs to his feet and moves to shut his door. He waits first for Mika to come out, and Shouto lets both of them in.

Mika beats both of them to the futon, but Midoriya hangs back as if uncertain, and it's not until Shouto's settling back down that he finally moves forward. Shouto holds up one corner of the comforter for him, and Midoriya crawls under and curls up against his side with a quiet sigh. The futon isn't too small to fit both of them, but there's only one pillow and Midoriya seems content stay close.

It's not that the nightmares stop there for the rest of the night. But the next time Shouto wakes up from one, all he has to do is turn his head and *oh, there he is, yes he's fine, yes he's breathing, go back to sleep.*

It saves a lot of time, that's all.

Chapter End Notes

> CW: selective mutism, nightmares, discussion/aftermath of trauma.
>
> Just a quick note, because I haven't mentioned this before and I really should, but the idea of Izuku having tapeta lucida first came from this fanart by vivi-set-this-on-fire. Thank you, Vivi, you've changed all our lives for the better.

Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

ART!!!!

eden--4

celestialseamysteries

jackrabbit1412

cricketmilk

error-404-fuck-not-found (2)

annavizziisa

shiina-lamya

thepensword (2)

asexualkittyclaws

coffinartist

enasketches

virevon

thegreysman

fingerspellingtopassthetime

daftyphun

(a video!!)

As always, this story has a TV Tropes page!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Toshinori wakes up in a cold sweat, again.

He grasps at the fading flashes of troubled dreams, snatches of words

and voices that slip from his grasp like fine sand. He keeps his eyes closed and his breathing slow, fighting to stay in that hazy limbo between sleep and reality, in an attempt to carry thoughts from one world to another, but it comes to nothing in the end. Toshinori opens his eyes to a pounding heart, a tired mind, and no more answers than he ever had before.

Transferring his life from one place to another was done almost thoughtlessly; his place of residence is less a home and more a place to keep things and sleep occasionally, and his private room in the new Heights Alliance dormitory serves those purposes just as well. The fact that he's having trouble sleeping has nothing to do with where he happens to be; something tells him these fears and worries would follow him from the dubious comfort of home to the ends of the earth.

The only thing that sticks with him is a voice—because that voice was not from a dream, but was very very real.

You believe yourself the savior of the world, when you failed to save someone who should have been so close to you—Shigaraki Tomura, born Shimura Tenko.

Toshinori shuts his eyes, curls up on his side as if he can ward off the memory.

What would your precious Nana say, if she knew that you had failed her own grandson?

(He can't. Can't escape the memory, can't demand answers from a dead man, can't even hear the frantic whisper so close to his ear, *not your fault, Toshi, never your fault.*)

Izuku wakes up warm.

He wakes up pleasantly drowsy, which happens rarely. Usually he wakes up feeling like death warmed over, or feeling wired and restless —nothing in between. Waking up in the morning is rarely comfortable, and yet here he is now, curled up warm with his cheek pressed against—

Something rises and falls under his arm, and Izuku's eyelids drag open.

Ah. Right.

There's only one pillow, and Izuku has apparently foregone using it in favor of mashing his face against Todoroki's shoulder instead. He has an arm thrown loosely over his friend's torso, rising and falling slightly as Todoroki breathes.

Before Izuku can gather his thoughts back into organized sets, Todoroki stirs, his steady breathing shifts, and suddenly Izuku isn't the only one awake anymore.

It's… disconcerting, almost. A lot of things make perfect sense in the wee hours of the morning, only to turn out odd and strange and confusing once the sun rises and common sense returns.

For example—he knows, logically, that Todoroki was the one who held his door open, didn't protest when Izuku took the silent invitation, and then literally invited him into bed. They may not have exchanged a single spoken word, but it all felt very clear and straightforward at the time. All the clutter in his head and the uncertainty that came with being awake at ass o'clock in the morning pointed to a clear course of action, and Izuku had taken it.

But now it's morning. Now it's all gone, the darkness and the fear and the nightmares that still felt semi-real, but Izuku's still here, lying in Todoroki's bed and using him as a pillow while they both wonder where they stand now.

At least, Izuku's wondering. He can't say for sure what Todoroki feels at the moment.

A stab of unreasonable panic has him sitting up, disentangling himself from Todoroki as carefully as possible. Embarrassment runs through him, thick and sticky and uncomfortably warm, and the split-second view he has of Todoroki's face only makes it worse, because Todoroki looks every bit as awkward and embarrassed about this whole thing as Izuku feels.

He'd rather not endure an uncomfortable silence, nor force Todoroki to ask him to leave, rather not have to hear it and be unable to answer back. So instead, he signs a quick *thanks for letting me stay* that he's sure Todoroki doesn't even catch, and makes a hurried exit. Thankfully there's no one out in the hall and his own door is all of two steps to the right, so Izuku ducks in and tries to settle his nerves in the solitude of his own room.

He realizes, rather belatedly, that he left his cat.

Training kick-starts that very morning. They have quite a bit of lost time to make up, considering that training camp got cut down to all of three days. (Izuku wonders if the three subsequent days he spent locked in a hellhole will make a difference. He didn't get much combat practice in; he mostly just ran around, talked to ghosts, and cried a lot.) The provisional license exam is coming up—if they pass, it will mark their next step toward becoming heroes. It's only a glorified learner's permit, and they'll still be restricted in what they can do, but it will authorize them to take action against villains in the future, without the threat of legal consequences.

Izuku grinds his teeth as Aizawa-sensei tells them all of this. He sees the back of Uraraka's head whenever he faces forward, and if he glances to the right he can see Kirishima two seats down. He has to turn a bit further to see Iida, Todoroki, and Yaoyorozu.

They came so close to getting expelled after coming to help him—he thinks. He only really has Aizawa's word to go on that, and the man does have a history of fibbing to make a point or motivate them. But it could have happened. It would have made sense for it to happen. It wouldn't have been fair, but it wouldn't have been out of nowhere, either.

He hopes they all pass. Then, if there's a next time, maybe they won't have to risk their futures for the sake of saving lives.

Then he hears what the order of business for the day is supposed to be, and Izuku takes a deep breath and lets it out in what sounds suspiciously like a sigh.

Uraraka twists around in her seat—in Bakugou's old seat—and her face is lit with a blinding grin. "Special moves!" she whisper-shouts at him. "I've been brainstorming lately—how about you, Deku?"

He shrugs. He has Full Cowl, but that's not a special move so much as a way for him to use One For All safely at all. He's imitated All-Might's signature smash moves, but he hasn't been able to manage any of them without breaking bones, and… well…

He's not All-Might, is he? All For One was twisted, manipulative, and evil, but he wasn't quite wrong about everything. All-Might is All-Might, and it's up to Izuku to learn from him but not to be him.

Their teachers are going all out for this; Izuku never expected anything different, but it's extra-clear when they reach the training ground for today. Besides Aizawa-sensei, they're joined by Midnight,

Cementoss, and Ectoplasm. While Aizawa and Midnight instruct them one-on-one, Cementoss tailors the environment to their individual needs, and Ectoplasm spawns dozens of clones to use as training dummies. Explosions fill the air—Bakugou's already getting started.

He's got a head start already, Izuku knows—he's been making up moves since his quirk first came in, and he's already got several ready that just need improvement. Everyone else is dispersing, talking to Cementoss for requests, asking Aizawa for help, or going off to do their own thing. Uraraka's already airborne, looking determined but slightly green.

Eventually, the only one still standing near him is Rei.

"Near" is a relative term, of course. Her attention is turned outward, watching his classmates train their quirks and figure out new applications, and Izuku finds himself watching her, too.

His hands flutter at his sides, finger-spelling along with his rapid-fire thoughts. He has two options, the way he sees things: either keep developing his use of One For All the way he was before the villains showed up, and hope something comes of it eventually, or try to think of something new. Something he hasn't quite tried before. There's an obvious solution to his problem, of course. If he wants to be someone who isn't All-Might, someone who isn't even all that much *like* All-Might, then the best place to start is the part of himself that All-Might doesn't have, and has never had.

It all comes back to his first quirk.

"Having trouble?"

Izuku jumps, half-turns in midair, and catches himself so he can properly face All-Might. There's a split-second moment of alarm when he sees that he's surrounded by students in his true form, not his hero form, but—

Oh. Right.

His mentor smiles at him. "Did I sneak up on you, just now? I don't think that's ever happened before."

Izuku manages to smile back, but he's not sure it's completely convincing. All-Might looks… upright. He's standing upright and seems to have no problem doing so, but…

He's injured still. Bandages cover his forehead, his arms—one of which is in a sling—and at least part of his chest, judging by the edge of white peeking out from beneath the loose collar of his shirt. Izuku is used to seeing him in this form, but for the first time, All-Might looks so *breakable* to him. There are extra shadows beneath his eyes that Izuku knows he's never seen before, and now that he's looking at All-Might properly, he can tell that there isn't much behind the smile.

Are you okay to be out here? he starts to ask, but over All-Might's shoulder, Nana shakes her head at him.

"Let him help, kiddo," she says. "He needs the distraction. And I'm pretty sure that you don't *not* need the help."

I was distracted, Izuku says instead. *I'm trying to work out what I want to do.*

All-Might nods. "Just remember—" He hesitates, and his lips go pale when he presses them together for a moment. "Don't—you know not to copy me. Right?"

His voice goes soft when he says that, his face troubled, and Izuku tries not to wince. It's uncomfortably close to what they've both heard from All For One. But it's not *wrong*, in fact it's the rightest thing either of them know at this point. They haven't even had the chance to talk about it—what All For One said and did, what Izuku saw, how he feels about escaping his grasp, how either of them feel now that he's dead.

I know, Izuku says, before it can get more awkward. *But it's harder to figure it out when I only know what not to be, and not what I'm supposed to be.* He activates Full Cowl, feels the power course through him—not all of it, but enough, and that's the frustrating part. He has what he needs. He just doesn't know what to do with it yet.

"It's not an easy answer," All-Might says. "And unfortunately, it's not one that can be fed to you. Because what you're supposed to be is you, and at the end of the day, no one else can tell you what that means—oh dear."

He turns as something falls out of his back pocket. While he's looking away, Izuku takes the opportunity to shoot a glare at Rei for slipping it out in the first place, the little menace. All-Might heaves a sigh and looks as if he's about to try and stoop to retrieve it, in spite of his injuries.

Relaxing his power, Izuku darts in and picks it up before he can strain himself. It's a book, and Izuku sees the cover before he can think better of it.

Teaching for Dummies.

All-Might looks terribly embarrassed, and it's a lot easier to grin at him when he looks like that. Izuku holds the book out, then shoots a quick sidelong glare at Rei when she tries to grab it and snoop. He feels the book tug in his grasp, and pushes it into All-Might's hands before Rei can try to steal it back.

Rei's hand is so close to All-Might's, pale but solid-looking to his eyes, that for a split second Izuku's heart clenches when her fingers nearly brush against his.

Full Cowl is back before Izuku even registers activating it.

There's—that's something. He's not just making it up, it's not just in his head, that's *something* and maybe it can become even more. Maybe…

"Young Midoriya?" His attention snaps back to All-Might. His teacher is looking at him closely.

Sorry. Have an idea. I'm gonna go test it.

All-Might smiles again, and moves on to speak with Jirou. Another explosion rocks the facility, and Izuku can hear him raising his voice to be heard. Izuku considers signaling Nana, but she doesn't know sign that well and it would take too long and draw too much attention to try to communicate with her. He'll stick with Rei for now.

Taking her hand, he leads her to another part of the training ground where cement columns provide some cover, far enough away from the others that he's not worried about being overheard. He activates Full Cowl, glances at his teachers to make sure they aren't watching and won't think he's sneaking off to slack, and turns to Rei.

I want to try something, he says. *And I need your help to do it.* She stands a little straighter, eager and interested, and Izuku takes a deep breath and settles his thoughts.

It had been a wild, chaotic moment. He hadn't thought much of it, not when it was happening and not now—it had just happened, and there hadn't been time, and after everything was over he'd been too focused

on knitting his mind back into something resembling order and reason. He'd been running on pure instinct at the time, and couldn't have worked out if it was something concrete or just a vague feeling in the heat of the moment.

The dead had been everywhere, countless souls crowded around him, reaching out for him as they pushed him toward freedom. And in that moment, some part of him had reached back.

Tell me if this… I don't know, feels bad, he says uncertainly. Rei nods, and Izuku reaches for her.

It's hard to recreate that feeling, here in a controlled environment instead of a screaming battlefield in the middle of the city. But Izuku does his best, taking Rei's cold hand, reaching inside of himself, and *pushing*.

Her form flickers, hair writhing, and she shoots up off the ground and sends concrete dust wafting up. Alarmed, Izuku lets go, but she seems okay. A little dazed, maybe, but not unhappy.

You okay? Izuku asks.

Fine, she says blinking. *Feels funny. Sort of… buzzy.*

She floats back as she answers, and hits the closest cement column.

As in, she actually hits it. It stops her.

Rei blinks. Izuku blinks.

Slowly, she turns around and puts her hand to it. She can still phase through it like a mirage, like she always does, but it's not automatic. She can touch it, too.

Rei looks upward. On top of the column, maybe ten feet off the ground, is a chunk of cement about half again as big as her head. It's probably rubble blown this way by Bakugou's quirk, and it's far bigger than anything Izuku has ever seen a ghost be able to move.

In a blur of black and white, Rei flits up to the top of the column, and gives the cement chunk a hard shove. As Izuku watches, the chunk goes tumbling off the top of the column, and lands with a scrape and a thud on the ground near where Izuku stands.

Izuku gapes. Once upon a time, a lifetime ago, he'd seen a broken TV

nearly fall on All-Might's head. But that had been a heavy and unstable mass, balanced in an already precarious position on a rickety stack of garbage. It had been dislodged, not pushed, and the culprit had been a very upset, very volatile poltergeist.

Rei rejoins him, passing mistlike through the column on her way down. *I think it's gone now,* she says. *Whatever it was. Can we do that again?*

Ochako has a pretty good vantage point, ten feet off the ground. Her stomach is protesting vehemently, but it's taking her considerably longer to puke than it used to, so she counts it as progress.

The edges of her vision are beginning to blur when she sees a familiar little figure in black and white, just within her peripherals. But when she turns her head, all she sees is Deku standing in the middle distance, quirk activated.

She releases her quirk to give herself a break, and sighs with relief when the vertigo eases.

A month or so earlier, she might have convinced herself that nausea was making her see things, but now—

Well. Now she knows better.

The first day of end-of-summer boot camp runs long and hard. It's hardly the worst training Shouto has ever experienced, but it's considerably more intense than the usual school training, and it leaves most of the class worn out. For his part, Shouto only feels comfortably tired by the time they're released back to the dorms, and he only becomes aware of how bad it is for the others when he and Iida walk into the common room and find their classmates sprawled out on the couches, looking half-dead.

Iida's booming voice reaches every corner of the room. "That was an excellent day of training! Remember to go to bed earl*mmfff!*" A couch cushion nails him in the face, followed by furious shushing from Uraraka, Kirishima, and Asui.

"Pipe down, Iida!" Uraraka whisper-shouts, and it's easy to see the reason—Midoriya is slumped against her side, apparently fast asleep.

"Oh!" Iida lowers his voice as well, which is quite a feat for Iida. "My

apologies! Though—perhaps it would be better for him to return to his room? We may all be tired, but a little rowdiness is par for course in our class, and he might appreciate being able to sleep without being disturbed."

Uraraka gives him a positively wounded look, and Shouto can kind of understand why. Moving Midoriya means waking him up first, and he looks peaceful enough that it feels wrong to do so.

"Nope! Too late!" Another stage whisper comes from Kaminari, wandering over with a marking pen twirling in his hand.

Uraraka's wounded expression turns venomous.

Kaminari grins with pure mischief on his face. "Hey, if he didn't want to get pranked then he shouldn't have fallen asleep down here, am I right?"

"He's not wrong," Asui says dryly, and disregards the glare that Uraraka throws at her. "Just don't wake him up, Kaminari-chan."

"'Course not, wouldn't dream of it." Kaminari crouches down so he can reach Midoriya's face with a steadier hand, and he must not sense the impending death close by. That's his own fault—Shouto is much farther away, and even he can see the murder in Uraraka's eyes.

"Kaminari," he says, about to warn him, right before main lamp flickers and goes out. It doesn't exactly plunge the room into darkness, but the change from well-lit to dim is jarring enough.

Kaminari pauses, the pen dangerously close to Midoriya's sleeping face, and glances around. "Aw, c'mon, what gives?"

"It's an electrical light," Kirishima points out. "Why don't *you* take a look at it?"

Kaminari snorts, but stands up anyway, the pen slipping from his fingers as he turns away. "Whoops, hang on—oh come on, where'd my pen go? Uraraka, did you kick it under the sofa?"

"No—uh. Yeah, I did." Uraraka levels another glare at him. "You're not getting it back, and I'm telling Momo not to make you another one."

Kaminari rolls his eyes and goes to check the light. He's only a step away from it when it flickers back on, as bright and steady as if

nothing happened. “Oh, boo, I lost a pen for nothing.”

“Karma,” Asui says, and it’s echoed raggedly by most of the others. Iida pulls Kaminari aside for a stage-whispered lecture on being considerate to classmates during their off hours, and Shouto moves to find his own seat. He’s not quite tired enough to go to bed yet, and he doesn’t mind the company.

Uraraka catches him by the wrist as he shuffles past her. “Hey, Todoroki, I’m glad you finally got here,” she says in a hushed voice. “Switch with me, I have to go to the bathroom.”

“What?” Shouto says, but doesn’t fight her when she manhandles him into her spot and transfers Midoriya’s limp, slightly-drooling head from her shoulder to his. Uraraka springs to her feet with a sigh of relief.

“You’re a *lifesaver*,” she tells him, and rushes off to the first-floor bathrooms.

Midoriya barely moves through the entire exchange, not that Shouto blames him—he spent at least the second half of the day just on quirk-strengthening exercises, so it’s no wonder he’s tired. Shouto’s tired, too—his muscles ache, and his whole body aches in that peculiar way it always does when he strains his limits when using his quirk. But it’s easy to sit on the soft couch, to angle himself into a comfortable surface for Midoriya to sleep on, to regulate his quirk to a pleasant level of warmth. It’s easy.

He has no idea why it’s so easy to offer comfort, when he’s spent his whole life being denied it, but that’s a train of thought that he’s not quite prepared to have while surrounded by quietly rowdy classmates who tend to joke in the face of sincerity. Maybe he’ll ask his mother about it, the next time he sees her. It seems like something she’d know about.

Eventually, they all drag themselves upstairs and into bed. Shouto’s sorry to see Midoriya wake up, but Midoriya himself barely seems to notice as he limps his way up to the second floor. The only time he shows signs of wakefulness is when he fights the others' attempts to herd him into the elevator, so Shouto resigns himself to helping drag him up the stairs instead. He leaves Midoriya at his bedroom door, and that’s the last Shouto sees of him for the rest of the evening.

This time, when Shouto wakes up with the sensation of fingers slipping from his grasp, he’s alone. He can’t turn his head and reassure

himself, because there's no one else in the room with him. Logically he should know that Midoriya's right next door, alive and well and probably too tired to deal with this nonsense, but it's hard to have a grasp on logic when you've just woken up in a literal cold sweat in the middle of the night.

His room is a double-edged sword. The familiarity is calming, tatami flooring and the softness of a futon and comforter, but at the same time familiarity brings memories, not all of them pleasant. He sleeps well on a futon with tatami mats underneath him because that's all he's ever known, but he's known them at the same time as he's known other, far less pleasant things.

Shouto blinks, and finds himself standing in front of Midoriya's door.

He doesn't want a walk and a drink of water. He knows what he wants, he knows what will help, but…

He hesitates. Of course he does. He's had bad dreams before. He's carried himself through bad nights. He can do it because he's always done it, because he never had a choice, because asking for help got him shouted at or worse, so why is it so easy to do it now?

He stands there for a good few minutes before the door opens, Midoriya's tired face peers out, and Shouto feels positively wretched.

It must show on his face, going by the fact that Midoriya doesn't shut the door on him. Instead, he opens it wider. Midoriya stands to the side, and the invitation is as clear as it was when Shouto offered the same.

It's dark—too dark to see All-Might's face in the posters on the wall. Midoriya's already shuffling back toward his bed, shifting Mika to one side, when Shouto halts in the middle of the room.

He's sleepy and miserable, but not so much that he's forgotten the awkwardness of the previous morning. He remembers, and he's not eager to repeat ittomorrow.

"Is this okay?" Speaking feels wrong, and Shouto doesn't know why. Is it the darkness? The late hour? The fact that Midoriya can't answer back the same way? "I didn't mind. But if you—I mean. I don't want to bother you. You don't have to—

Midoriya turns back to him and sighs audibly. He sounds put upon.

Not with his presence, Shouto realizes. Just with the questions. The hesitation. His classmate signs something, but it's dark and Shouto is still a beginner. He catches the sign for 'sleep' but no more.

Midoriya sighs again, and for a single vague instant, Shouto feels as if he's being nudged forward.

He hasn't slept in a bed since his last hospital stay. He hasn't slept in a real bed since… ever. It's softer than his futon but not as soft as he expected. Sleeping so high off the ground is something he'll never quite get used to. But Midoriya is there, and Midoriya has this odd knack for making things easy, for making complicated things a great deal simpler, and for quieting the thoughts in his head until Shouto knows what to do.

Shouto falls asleep, and stays asleep, and it's easy.

Things fall into a routine for the rest of the week. During the day, Izuku trains both of his quirks. With One For All alone, he pushes the limits of his endurance, fighting to bring up his maximum percentage without causing injury. He spars with his classmates, with Ectoplasm's clones, with anyone who isn't Bakugou. A hairline fracture in his wrist sends him first to Recovery Girl and then to the Support Department, where eager-eyed Hatsume Mei listens to his requests and modifies his costume to have proper support for his arms.

Rei helps with the other half of his training, and eventually so do Tensei and Nana and Narita and even Hino. Izuku fills notebook pages with observations and scribbled theories. He's empowering the dead, both with his presence alone and with an active use of his own power. He's not sure how it happens, yet, or how to make it stronger. He wishes there were someone he could ask.

(*There could be,* he reminds himself whenever All-Might is near.)

At night, he sleeps as much as he can. He doesn't go to Todoroki for every nightmare. Sometimes they aren't bad, sometimes they're the old nightmares of past ghosts and closet doors, and he can suffer through those without bothering anyone else. He only dreams about Kamino a few times—when he does, it sends him to the room next door, heart in his throat as he crawls into Todoroki's bed and fights back his terror with firm, solid reality. The next morning, they wake up and don't talk about it.

They probably should. Hino says they should, and even Rei keeps

giving him disapproving looks whenever he flees back to his own room. But Shouto's sign is barely passable outside of fingerspelling, and this isn't a discussion to have over text—is what Izuku tells himself, when he puts it off yet again.

The nights he spends by himself are probably obvious to the others. They're too polite to say anything, even when he nods off during the day, even though he only ever does that on other people—he dozes on Kirishima's shoulder over breakfast one morning, and that's sort of what takes it from an amusing novelty to an actual Thing.

It's a quiet, easy transition. Izuku weathers gentle teasing from Kaminari and Sero and a few of the others. For some reason they only get really insufferable when it's Todoroki's shoulder he nods off on, but he's never quite awake enough to try analyzing that.

He doesn't see why it's so funny, anyway. It's just easiest to shut his brain up when he's around Todoroki. Being around him is comfortable. It's safe in a way that Izuku never quite feels on his own. They're good friends, and that's part of being good friends, isn't it?

Gradually, as days pass and he spends more time training and surrounding himself with friends, it starts to feel less and less like he has a padlock on his tongue.

Shouto wakes up to Mika trying to wash his hair. There's no pillow under his head, because Midoriya seems to have stolen it at some point during the night, and he raises his head with a soft groan at the crick in his neck. It's a tiny noise, but still enough to wake his friend. Midoriya stirs and snuffles quietly on his left, and Mika leaves off grooming Shouto's hair to sit on his head.

Midoriya groans at this, and the sound is thunderous—both because the room is silent, and because it's technically the first time Shouto has heard his voice in weeks. It's not even words, but it's still good to hear.

His friend sits up with a yawn, spills Mika to the floor, and untangles himself from the covers before getting to his feet. Reluctantly, Shouto rubs sleep out of his eyes and follows.

There's something weirdly endearing about Midoriya when he's just woken up. Shouto remembers once describing him as equal parts chatty, cheerful, creepy, and vicious, and early morning Midoriya is none of those things. He's quiet, and was quiet even back during

training camp before everything went wrong, he's good-natured but not excessively cheery, and it's impossible for anyone to look creepy or vicious with outrageous bedhead and pillow creases on their face.

Thanks, Midoriya says, and Todoroki may be not be well-versed in sign yet, but he's seen that one enough to recognize it easily. It's what Izuku always says, when they do this. In fact, it's all he says.

Shouto only hopes they can gather the nerve to say more, once Midoriya's voice comes back.

A cold spot between his shoulders becomes a tickle up his spine, and Shouto rubs the back of his neck to ward off the feeling of goosebumps. He must be letting his quirk loose in his sleep again, because his room feels draftier than normal some mornings. He hopes Midoriya doesn't notice; would he even bring it up if he did?

Without further fuss, Midoriya opens the door to return to his own room, only to startle as soon as he steps outside. Hearing his sharp intake of breath, Shouto pokes his head out into the hallway.

Aoyama stands just outside his own door, hair mussed from sleep, wrapped in a robe that's just a bit too fancy for a high school dormitory. He stares at them, wide-eyed with surprise, before his face breaks out in a wide grin.

"Ohoho, my goodness," Aoyama chuckles, lifting his hand to his mouth so that it looks as if he's trying to hide it, without actually hiding anything at all. "Only a week in? You two certainly didn't waste any time. Though, don't let me interrupt anything!" With a broad wink, he strides off down the hallway to the stairs, leaving Shouto wondering what any of that was supposed to mean.

Oh, well. Aoyama's always been theatrical and odd.

Shouto gets down to the common room before Midoriya does, though about half the rest of the class beats him there. Iida's there, of course, as well as Yaoyorozu, Bakugou, Aoyama, Shouji, Tokoyami, Satou, Asui, and Ashido. The latter catches sight of him first, and shows her teeth in a grin.

"Morning, Todoroki! Didja sleep well?"

Shouto blinks, vaguely surprised. "Yes?" Ashido's friendly and outgoing enough that being addressed by her isn't that big of a deal, but Shouto isn't usually a target for her relentless good cheer.

The grin on Ashido's face becomes teasing. "Really, now. How well?"

"Like a rock." Shouto moves into the kitchen. Someone's already put coffee on, and he pours himself a cup. He's going to need it, if Ashido's decided to be extra friendly today.

"So, then you wouldn't be able to tell us anything… interesting?" Ashido asks. Shouto is about to ask her to get to the point when Asui chimes in.

"Mina-chan's trying to fish for gossip," she says. "You can ignore her if you want, it's none of her business."

Ashido's over-exaggerated pout gets a chuckle from Yaoyorozu and Aoyama, which Iida quickly drowns out. "Ms. Tsuyu is absolutely correct!" he says sternly. "It is none of our business, and Todoroki is not obligated to answer anyone's questions, and neither is Mi—neither is anyone else, provided they are being responsible about this." He shoots a quick, sidelong glance at Shouto, then concludes, "What consenting parties do behind closed doors is no one's business but their own."

Bakugou chokes on a mouthful of coffee and slams his mug down on the counter so hard it's a miracle it doesn't break. "Nope!" he bursts out. "Fuck this. Fuck all of you. Fuck everything." With that, he storms out. Iida sighs heavily and goes to clean out the abandoned mug.

Shouto searches the rest of his classmate's faces for some kind of explanation as to what's going on, but no one's looking at him, and they're all desperately trying to look innocent. Midoriya comes trotting out to the kitchen only a minute later, and it only seems to make things worse. Ashido doesn't try to wheedle answers out of him, but she does sit at the table and look ready to explode.

It's too early for this.

Once Izuku manages to duck out of the main room and out of sight, he signs so forcefully that he nearly whacks himself in the face. *They think we're WHAT?*

Instead of answering, Rei doubles up and laughs so hard that the lights in the common room flicker.

Izuku leaps over a sweeping kick from Iida. It's a close thing; Iida doesn't use Recipro Burst to make it, but his quirk makes him wicked fast all the same. He follows up with a second kick that nearly knocks Izuku off balance, and in the blink of an eye Iida has him on the defensive. It takes the upper limits of Full Cowl just to stay ahead of each blow, and Izuku focuses his power and pushes at those limits as far as he dares. He springs back onto a cement platform to gain some distance, but Iida doesn't let him stay far away for long.

Sparring with Iida is good for this kind of exercise. He's the only one in class who's faster than Izuku is with Full Cowl, and his costume is mostly tough armor, so there's some room for error.

It also helps that Izuku has barely ever sparred with him before, so Iida keeps him on his toes.

He's different from Todoroki, that's for sure—though maybe that's because he knows Todoroki's fighting style forwards and backwards, so any variation stands out. But Todoroki's best with ranged fighting, and that shows through even in hand-to-hand. He dodges mostly, keeps his opponents at a distance before getting in close to take them down as quickly as possible, with a well-practiced throw or blows aimed at pressure points.

Iida avoids close quarters too, but only because he mostly attacks with devastatingly powerful kicks, and he needs space for that. At first glance, his fighting style seems entirely unique to someone with his quirk, but the longer they spar, the more Izuku sees.

That's another advantage to sparring with Iida; Izuku's learning a lot. Having Tensei close by to call out encouragement and advice doesn't hurt.

(Except it does hurt, but for different reasons.)

In a split second, Izuku sees an opening, and lunges for it. It's far from perfect, being his first try, but he still manages to catch Iida by surprise with one of his own kicks, replicated with Full Cowl instead of Engine.

It's not lost on his friend. Iida takes the hit and stumbles back, and even though his face is hidden by his helmet, Izuku hears him laugh.

"You got it!" He holds up his hand, and the two of them pause for a breather. "I'll have to be more careful doing special moves around you. You have a good eye, Midoriya."

Izuku signs a *thank you,* and Iida answers with an inexpert but still understandable *you're welcome.*

"He's right," Tensei remarks. Rei's already off on her own, imitating some of the high kicks that Iida was performing. "You have a good head for analysis. And, if you get the chance, could you tell him he favors his right a little too much? It makes his moves that much easier to predict."

Izuku nods, without thinking, and then freezes when he sees Iida watching him.

It's so easy to forget that his secret isn't a secret from everyone anymore. That there are two people in his class who won't write him off if they see him doing something odd.

A deafening explosion and crack saves him from whatever might have come next. At the top of one of Cementoss's high platforms, Bakugou is sharpening new techniques with his explosions. The whole class is pretty spread out. Ojiro is on another platform with a few others, apparently giving an impromptu martial arts tutorial. Others, like Uraraka, are working on quirk endurance. Still others are experimenting; Izuku can't quite tell from this distance exactly *what* Tokoyami is doing with Dark Shadow, but it sure does look interesting.

At ground level, their teachers pick their way through the students, offering instruction and guidance wherever it's needed.

"It seems All-Might is here as well," Iida remarks. "Is it wise for him to be here, do you think? This area is hardly safe, what with all the volatile quirks nearby."

Izuku looks at him, shocked and a bit confused.

"I know," Iida sighs. "He's *All-Might,* and it seems absurd to worry about his safety, but still. Things are different now, and he… he just isn't the same as what he once was. Not physically, at least. I know his heart hasn't changed, and he's still the same person and the same teacher we've known, but… but now he's…"

Izuku opens his mouth to reply, but he can't figure out how to put the words in order. Iida isn't wrong, not completely, but—but All-Might *hasn't* changed, not as much as everyone thinks. All-Might was already like this, already weakened and frail beneath his bluster and the fumes of One For All. In the difficult months leading up to the entrance

exam, Izuku trained under him in this form just as much as he did under his hero form.

He's about to try to find a way to drag the words out of himself when another explosion resounds from Bakugou's platform. It's followed by cracking, and then the rough scrape of broken concrete before Bakugou's voice rings out.

"*Get clear, it's coming down!*"

A massive chunk of concrete, dislodged by Bakugou's latest attack, tips off the edge of the platform and goes tumbling to the ground below. Full Cowl is out before Izuku looks to the spot beneath it and sees All-Might standing there.

He's far away—too far away to outrun gravity. But One For All hums within him, and there's a presence at his side and a hand in his, small and cold and familiar.

"*Go, Rei,*" he hisses, and pushes a thread of his power out of himself and into her.

She flies, and no one else sees— how she shoots through the air like an arrow from a bow, and cannons into the falling concrete in midair. It's almost as big as Izuku is, but Rei hits it hard enough to shift its trajectory, so that it crashes down on empty ground. All-Might stumbles back, startled but unharmed.

Rei perches on top of the chunk of concrete, now cracked from the impact, and grins like a pale little jack o' lantern.

The others check on him, fuss over him, scold him gently for carelessness, but Toshinori barely hears them.

All he hears is Aizawa's words, *Back again, All-Might? Don't overdo it, you're still injured and it might not be safe.* All he hears is Bakugou shouting from the top of the platform, *Be more careful, All-Might!*

His hands shake, both the one hanging at his side and the one hanging in the sling. No one's told him that in a while, no one's meant it *like that*—who would say something like that to All-Might, of all people? Who would ever worry over All-Might's safety, in the face of something so silly as a little falling debris?

Is this what I am now? Someone who has to be protected by others?

Now, of all times, when I've only just realized a failure?

How am I supposed to fix it when I can't protect even myself?

How am I supposed to make it up to her when I am this*?*

Chapter End Notes

CW: nightmares, selective mutism, feelings of inadequacy

Chapter 44

Chapter Notes

Enjoy the art!

irene-draws

cricketmilk

stars-and-aces

actually-deku

cadelnicolekatieandcamille

fayethefae

akishoo

fingerspellingtopassthetime

As always, this story has a TV Tropes page!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's almost viciously anti-climactic, so much so that Shouto wonders if Midoriya didn't do it that way on purpose.

It's Friday night, and the first week of boot camp is done. Much to Shouto's surprise, they actually have the weekend off, which means he'll probably be getting permission to leave campus and visit his mother at some point. It also means that the half of the class that hasn't gone to bed yet is feeling rowdy, in spite of the fact that today was no less physically taxing than the previous days.

"Sleepover in the common room!" Ashido howls, launching a couch cushion at Sero's face. He ducks, and it skims off the top of his head. "Everybody grab blankets!"

"Now wait a moment!" Iida pitches his voice above the rest. "We mustn't be remiss in proper rest, especially given our vigorous training!"

“Loosen up, Iida!” Kaminari laughs. “Friday doesn’t count as a school night—who cares how late we stay up, as long as we can sleep in as much as we want tomorrow?”

“That is not a healthy habit, Kaminari-kun!”

Eventually, some of the others—mainly Ashido—manage to wring a compromise out of Iida by promising to set themselves a special weekend curfew, and then proceed to haggle him up to midnight at the earliest. Shouto watches from the sidelines, amused and somewhat impressed. If the heroics thing doesn’t pan out for Ashido, she could probably go into business negotiation for a living. That was pretty slick.

“Perhaps eleven-thirty?” Iida offers, as a last-ditch effort.

“Either midnight, or we’re throwing an all-night party in Hagakure’s room,” Ashido retorts.

“Yeah, *that’ll* happen,” Midoriya says dryly.

Shouto actually jumps. The entire room falls silent. Midoriya doesn’t look up, just continues watching a video of a baby goat on his phone.

“Sensors and cameras,” he goes on. “They help enforce curfew and lights-out. Plus, after today, I give most of us ‘til *maybe* a quarter to midnight before we crash anyway. So.” His voice cracks as he speaks —it’s rough from lack of use.

But he *speaks*.

Shouto feels sorry for Midoriya in the next moment, when the entire class seems to scream out as one. His friend cringes a little at the noise, but still manages a shaky smile as he looks up from his phone. Uraraka and Kirishima tackle him off the couch, hugging him between them. Shouto deftly swipes Midoriya’s dropped phone before someone can accidentally sit on it in the commotion.

“Man, so he’s finally talking again, after… this morning,” he hears Kaminari say. “Who knew Todoroki was *just that good* with—” He doesn’t get any further than that, because Asui promptly tries to smother him with a pillow.

Shouto blinks, vaguely confused. Does Kaminari or anyone else think that *he’s* the one who made Midoriya start talking again? That’s… flattering, certainly, but completely untrue. As far as he knows,

Midoriya never made it a secret that his silence would eventually pass. Shouto considers bringing this up, but everyone's a bit too preoccupied to care, so he shrugs to himself and sits back.

"Okay okay okay, how about this?" Ashido says, loudly enough to be heard over the clamor. "A nice, quiet game… of Truth or Dare?"

Bakugou gets up and leaves. Kirishima protests, but it's no use because Bakugou's already gone. Shouto is tempted to follow his example, and just going by the look on Midoriya's face, he's also strongly considering it.

"Sounds like fun!" Uraraka pipes up. "Hey Deku, have you ever played before?"

Midoriya shakes his head vigorously.

"First timers have to play!" Hagakure calls out eagerly.

Iida gives up on trying to discourage them and resigns himself to going along with it—to supervise, presumably. With Bakugou gone, only Ashido, Sero, Kaminari, Iida, Kirishima, Midoriya, Hagakure, and Asui are still up and about. Mika's here as well, moving from lap to lap as if testing each one for comfort. Once they're all settled in a rough circle in the middle of the floor, Mika claims her usual spot on Shouto's left thigh, and purr-meows until he pets her. To his right, Midoriya sees this and snickers softly under his breath.

A round of "nose goes" chooses Hagakure to start the game, in spite of her protests. ("I totally had my finger on my nose, you guys just couldn't see it!")

"Okay… who else hasn't played besides Midoriya?" she asks. Shouto raises his hand, and isn't that surprised when no one else does. That's usually how it is. "Okay, Todoroki! Truth or dare?"

Caught of guard, it's all Shouto can do to keep from stammering. "Dare?"

"Hmm…" Judging by the direction of her sleeve, it looks like she's tapping her chin in thought. "Pick someone else in the game. Just point to them."

"Why?"

"You'll find out when you pick!"

“Oh.” Shouto does a quick sweep of the circle. “Um… Iida.” He’s not sure what this is about, but Iida’s usually a safe choice.

“Okay then.” For a moment he could swear that Hagakure sounds slightly disappointed. “I dare you to tell Iida something you privately think about him, but have never said out loud.”

“Uh…” A lot of the things he’s privately thought about Iida tie back to what happened in Hosu, and legal gag orders trump sleepover games. For a few moments Shouto wracks his brain, until he finally settles upon one that seems fairly safe.

He turns to Iida, who looks faintly nervous.

“Your right hook is atrocious,” he says. “You should probably work on that.”

That gets a ripple of muffled laughter, and even Iida cracks a sheepish grin. If it happens to leave their classmates desperately wondering when and why Iida punched him at some point, well… answering that wasn’t part of the dare.

The game continues from there. Iida picks truth, and Shouto asks him what happens if water gets into his engines, which prompts a long-winded explanation that teaches Shouto far more about metal oxidation than he ever knew before. He bears witness to Ashido getting tickled, learns that Asui has in fact tripped over her tongue before, and watches Kaminari inexpertly apply a coat of lipstick—on Sero.

It’s all very silly, but Shouto can see why this kind of thing is so popular. It’s… fun, in a weird way. Enough for him to forget that he’s tired from a week of nonstop training. It’s loose and carefree, and if there is some tension over dares and awkward questions, it’s all very low-pressure.

“Midoriya-chan,” Asui sing-songs, a few rounds in. She’s sitting upside down on the couch, her long hair dangling toward the carpet, and she’s not allowed to move from that position for the next five turns. “Truth or dare?”

“Da—no, truth,” Midoriya answers, and seems to brace himself. “I pick truth.”

Asui purses her lips. To Shouto’s surprise, Iida and Uraraka lean forward as if they’re interested in what she’s about to say.

“How come you keep falling asleep on people?” she asks. “You always look really tired, and you always say you don’t sleep very well, so how come you can sleep on other people instead?”

Midoriya relaxes. “Oh. That. It’s safe.”

Asui cocks her head, which looks strange when she’s upside down. “It’s safe?”

Shouto remembers having this conversation with him, way back at the start of the forest camp. It still seems strange, for him to say that when Shouto’s pretty sure Midoriya falls asleep on him more than anyone else. There has to be more to it.

“Uh, yeah.” Midoriya fidgets in his spot. “I can’t sleep if I don’t feel safe, and it… feels safer around some people than it does when I’m by myself, at night. In the dark. Having weird dreams.”

“Aw, man, Midoriya…” Kirishima looks like he’s about to cry. “Are you saying you feel safe with us?”

“I-I mean… yes?”

Uraraka’s sitting on Midoriya’s other side, and pulls him into a hug.

“You guys know what this means?” Hagakure says thoughtfully. “Midoriya must feel safest around Todoroki, then.” Shouto turns to stare at her.

“Yeah, I bet,” Kaminari says, straight-faced. Ashido giggles.

Midoriya’s face is red with embarrassment. “There’s nothing wrong with that,” he says quietly. “So what if I do?”

Shouto turns to stare at him, shocked. “Wait what? *Why*?” He had assumed he was an exception, or maybe an oversight, but that wouldn’t explain why Midoriya’s looking at him like that’s the dumbest question he could have asked.

“Oh for the love of—” Ashido snorts. “Midoriya, can I go next?”

“U-um, sure.” Midoriya leaves off staring at Shouto, looking a bit rattled. “Truth or dare?”

Ashido speeds through her turn with the revelation that for her entire middle school growth spurt her horns were too big for her to wear pullover tops, and then turns to Shouto with a look of determination.

“Todoroki! Truth or dare?”

He doesn’t like that look. That’s the kind of look that promises an awkward question that he’ll answer and reveal far more information than he would like. Better to play it safe. “Dare,” he says, and realizes he’s misjudged it when Ashido’s dark eyes light up with triumph.

“I dare you to kiss Midoriya!” she bursts out. “And no pecking him on the cheek like he’s your grandmother, it’s gotta be a liplock.”

“*What*?” Midoriya’s voice cracks. Shouto’s too busy gaping at her to form a response.

Izuku is very, very glad that Hino cleared off as soon as the game started, and dragged Tensei out with him. He’s gaping at Todoroki, and then at Ashido, hoping his panic doesn’t show on his face. He doesn’t have much to hope for, if Uraraka’s muffled giggle is any indication. Rei’s no help, she’s too busy laughing too.

“Don’t be shy, guys!” Kaminari calls out encouragingly. “I mean, it’s nothing we haven’t figured out already, Aoyama even saw you guys come out of the same bedroom this morning, so it’s no big deal—”

“It’s—it’s not like that,” Izuku says weakly. He can’t help feeling a little trapped. If he explains, then he’ll inevitably have to say he and Todoroki were sleeping together, and he has a feeling that would only dig them deeper. Flustered, he looks to Todoroki for help, but his friend is every bit as helpless-looking as he is.

“We shouldn’t make our classmates do things they don’t want to!” Iida interjects.

“Uh, dude, that’s kind of the whole point of Truth or Dare,” Sero points out. “You do know that, right?”

“Look, I know what it looks like,” Izuku says. “But you’ve got it wrong. I-I mean, remember the question I just answered? About sleeping? It was just that. We were just—sharing a room.” That’s a much safer way to put it. Not as many incriminating connotations.

“Wait,” Todoroki speaks up for the first time. “What did you *think* we were doing?”

A hush falls over the rest of his classmates. A few meaningful glances are exchanged.

“Oh you sweet summer child,” Kaminari whispers.

Ashido sighs heavily, and Izuku strongly suspects that she doesn’t completely believe them. “Well, what’s a kiss on the lips between friends?” she asks. “I’ve done it before, loads of times!”

“But…” But it’s not like that, Izuku wants to repeat, except… is it?

His intentions were innocent, and he knows that Todoroki’s were too, but… but they *have* been sharing a bed lately. Izuku can’t imagine himself doing that with anyone who *isn’t* Todoroki. Not even with Uraraka or Iida. He’s not sure why, it’d just be… weird, somehow. Falling asleep on people’s shoulders is one thing, but he and Todoroki moved past that point a while ago.

Does that make the others right? Has he had feelings for Todoroki this whole time that were so secret that even he didn’t know they were there? How did he just not notice that? How—?

Todoroki nudges him, and Izuku jumps.

“You’re muttering again,” he says.

“Sorry,” Izuku says automatically.

“It’s not a bad thing,” Todoroki assures him. “You just haven’t done it out loud in a while.”

They’re sitting right up against each other, and Izuku’s never had a problem being this close, but now he feels hyper-aware of every spot where they’re touching. His face feels hot. Is *this* what a crush is supposed to feel like? Is he reading too much into it?

…He’s taking too long.

“Listen, it’s my dare, not yours,” Todoroki tells him. “There’s probably some rule about not dragging other people into it if it’s not their turn, right?”

“Laaaaame!” Kaminari calls out, only to falter when Asui turns to look him dead in the eye.

“You’re kind of being a Mineta right now,” she says. There’s a chorus of groans and uncomfortable laughter.

“Asui… too soon…” Kaminari says weakly.

That defuses the tension just a bit, enough that Izuku can shrug the rest off. “It’s fine,” he says, sounding just a bit more confident than he feels. He shifts so that it’s easier to turn and face Todoroki. “On the count of three?”

Sure,” Todoroki says. “One, two—”

He moves in, but Izuku also moves in at the same time, and they crash clumsily in the middle. Izuku’s aim is off, and he ends up smashing his lower lip between his teeth and Todoroki’s chin. “Ow!”

“Sorry, hold on.” Todoroki reaches up to hold Izuku’s jaw steady, and the second attempt is slightly more successful, in that their lips are now connected with a low chance of drawing blood by accident.

It’s… colder than expected. Partly because of Todoroki’s quirk, and partly because someone has spit on their lips and Izuku can’t tell which. So it’s a little wetter than he would have liked, but it’s—they’re here. This is a kiss, probably.

…Now what.

Logically Izuku knows it’s only been a second or so, but… is something else supposed to happen? Should there be movement? What comes next? Or is a kiss just supposed to be two people connected at the mouth, trying not to breathe too hard on each other?

He starts to ask, panics, and starts opening his mouth without pulling back first. To make matters worse, Todoroki starts to shift his position, and Izuku ends up lipping him by accident. Which just adds even more moisture to the whole mess, and yeah, this dare is over.

Izuku jerks back, spitting out Todoroki’s lower lip in the process. He wipes his mouth on the back of his hand, scooting back to his original position so quickly he almost crashes into Uraraka.

Rei is gone, but Izuku can hear her howling with merriment in the next room.

“Was that good enough?” Todoroki asks.

For a moment, Ashido doesn’t answer. She’s too busy staring at the two of them as if her entire worldview has been thrown into question.

“That was literally the worst kiss I’ve ever seen,” Sero remarks.

“But it was a kiss, right?” Todoroki asks. “Can I—is it my turn now?”

“You okay, Midoriya-chan?” Asui asks. “How was it?”

Izuku blinks. Logically he knows he doesn’t have to answer; it’s not like he’s taking a Truth turn. But still… this is the kind of thing people are supposed to be able to describe, right? Their—holy shit, that was his first kiss.

“It tasted like mouth,” he says.

The game has to pause a moment so that Sero, Kaminari, and Hagakure can stop laughing.

Midoriya proves correct; by a quarter to twelve, Sero has fallen asleep on one of the couches and most of the rest are nodding off. It’s easier now for Iida to gently herd everyone upstairs, in spite of Ashido’s sleepy protests. Midoriya takes the stairs, as always; he’s the first one out of the room, and for a moment Shouto considers following him.

He’s… not entirely sure what just happened. He’s pretty sure it wasn’t a bad thing, though he’s been wrong before. Midoriya didn’t seem angry or even all that upset, just thoroughly embarrassed. Still, it feels like something he ought to follow up on, without the others watching and listening. For his part, Shouto knows he feels *something* about it. The problem is that he’s pretty sure he’s feeling several things, all tangled up within him and so hopelessly snarled that he’s at a loss to name any one of them.

He doesn’t see Midoriya again before he gets to his room and gets ready for bed. He wonders if this will be another night spent sharing a room.

There’s a knock at the door. *Well, that answers that question.*

Shouto answers it. It’s not Midoriya; it’s Iida, looking sheepish and apologetic.

“Oh! Er, hello, Todoroki.” Iida shifts from foot to foot. “I, er—sorry to disturb you, just… I wanted to apologize, for earlier.”

“Oh.” Shouto blinks, thoroughly befuddled. “What for?”

“For not—” Iida’s hands twists together. “You and Midoriya were forced into… an uncomfortable situation. Regardless of the game, it

was thoroughly inappropriate for the others to pressure you two into doing something you weren't comfortable with. I should have spoken up and put a stop to it, but I was… remiss. I hope you can forgive me."

"It's fine," Shouto says. "It's not a big deal, really."

Iida gives him a pained smile. "Still, I ought to have asserted myself better, but the whole thing spiraled out of my control, somewhat."

"It's not always your responsibility," Shouto points out. "We're outside of school hours. You can't watch over us all the time."

His friend laughs softly. "Ha, well I can certainly try, now that on-campus housing is in effect."

Shouto shakes his head. "You'll only run yourself ragged—"

The door to the right opens, and Midoriya slips out with Mika at his feet. He closes his door and steps toward Shouto's, only to stop short at the sight of Iida. His eyes flicker to the sides, as if taking in more than Shouto can see.

Upon seeing him, Iida turns a bit pink at the ears and backs away. "Ah, Midoriya! I was just—I wanted to apologize, for not coming to your defense earlier when the others—"

"It's fine," Midoriya interrupts. "I mean, it wasn't bad, just awkward and kind of embarrassing. But we're good—well, I'm good."

"I'm good, too," Shouto adds.

"Everything's fine," Midoriya concludes, fidgeting a little. "If it's not fine, I'll let you know if you can help, I promise."

"Right. Good night, then. I'll leave you two to, ah…" He glances between them, and his ears go a bit pinker. Shouto heaves a sigh. He's starting to see where people's thoughts are taking them.

"Iida, *no*," Midoriya says, a bit desperately. "I swear it isn't like that, I just want to talk to him, that's all. We don't—we're not—"

"It's none of my business either way," Iida says. "It's something private, whatever it is, so I'll leave you to it. Just don't stay up too late; even if it is the weekend, there's no need to form bad habits, and you'll only regret it come Monday when it's harder to get up in the

morning—”

“Yes, *Mother*,” Midoriya says dryly, which startles a laugh out of their friend.

“It really is good to have you back, Midoriya,” he says. “Goodnight, both of you.” With that, he leaves them.

Mika is already sliding past Shouto’s ankles as Midoriya approaches. “Can we talk?” he asks. Shouto nods and lets him in.

“Do we *need* to talk?” Shouto asks, after he’s closed the door behind him. “If this is about earlier, I’m fine with pretending it didn’t happen if you are.” He hesitates, wondering if that was the wrong thing to say. What if Midoriya doesn’t agree?

“No. I mean, yes we need to talk.” Midoriya paces a little. “It’s… sort of about that? But not completely. I’ve been wanting to talk to you for, kind of a while. It’s about, um.” He gestures vaguely between them, and the futon laid out on the floor. “This… whole thing.”

Shouto feels his heart sink, heavy with dread. “…Oh.”

“It’s nothing bad!” Midoriya says quickly. “At least, I don’t think so. I don’t… I mean, it was sort of embarrassing, people jumping to conclusions like that, but I don’t want to stop. Doing this, I mean.” He stares at the floor and fidgets.

“They think we’re together, don’t they,” Shouto says, and knows he’s right when Midoriya cringes. “They think we’re in a relationship.”

Midoriya nods. “Pretty much. And Kaminari seems to—well, never mind Kaminari.”

This is not a conversation to be had while standing. With another sigh, Shouto goes and sits on his futon, because that’s the most comfortable place in his room at the moment. After a moment’s hesitation, Midoriya joins him.

“Are we?” Shouto asks.

“Huh?”

“Are we in a relationship?” he finishes, and feels a very strange urge to chew on his own tongue as he says it out loud. “I mean… is that what this is?”

Midoriya's groan is muffled because he's hiding his face in his hands. "That's kind of what's been bugging me," he says, dragging his fingers down to his chin. "I mean, it's not, because neither of us ever said it and I'm pretty sure you're supposed to, to communicate that kind of thing, but… I don't know. Are we *supposed* to be?"

"What do you mean by 'supposed to be'?" It comes out harsher than he intends, and he shuts his mouth before he can snap again. Midoriya blinks at him, bewildered, and then his eyes widen.

"Oh—*oh*, nonono, I didn't mean it like that, I—I'm sorry. I forgot, about… um…" *Your mother,* he doesn't say. "I didn't mean 'supposed to' like we *have* to and don't have a choice, I just… we sleep in the same bed, and I… I've told you things I haven't really told other people, and I *think* you do the same? So I just, I wonder if… if this all adds up to what the others think. I just wonder if they're right, that's all."

"I don't really care about what the others think," Shouto points out. "Do you even *want* to?"

Midoriya doesn't answer right away, and that's a problem. Because Shouto realizes that Midoriya's answer, whatever it is, is really going to matter to him. It makes him dread hearing it at the same time as it makes him desperate to hear it.

"I…" Midoriya meets his eyes, and Shouto sees his own helpless confusion reflected in his friend's face. "I just… *no*. I don't think I do."

Shouto breathes out, and he only notices the knot in his chest when it loosens. He feels as if he could physically sag. It's not disappointment. It's relief.

Midoriya gives a rough, frustrated groan and flops backward onto the soft comforter. Mika makes herself comfortable on his stomach. "But it's just—that makes everything more confusing, because then I don't know *what* this is."

"Um." Shouto blinks at him. "Friendship?"

Midoriya barks out a humorless laugh. "I'm friends with Iida. I'm friends with Uraraka. And Kirishima. And Asui, sometimes. But I wouldn't crawl into bed with any of them. Would you?"

Shouto considers this. Iida is a great friend. He feels a little closer to Uraraka than he was before Kamino. Yaoyorozu's fantastic.

But he's closest to Midoriya. He always has been. It feels different—stronger, somehow.

"I wouldn't," he agrees. "But then… what does that make us?"

"I don't know," Midoriya sighs. "I like you. I really, really like you. Just not the way they think I do. Not—not the way people talk about."

Shouto lies back, his head hitting the pillow. Midoriya's head is about level with his elbow—he can feel his friend's hair tickling his arm. "What way's that?"

"Oh, you know," Midoriya says with a shrug. "Butterflies in your stomach. Sparks when you touch. Kissing. Stuff like that. People go crazy for that stuff, but I just don't. I never really have. And sometimes I'm not sure, sometimes it feels like I *might* be feeling like that, but it always goes away so fast and I realize it wasn't a crush, I was just embarrassed and awkward. A-and now with this, it's like I can't tell if it's supposed to be friendship or not because I didn't have any friends before I came here, so I'm always second-guessing myself and I'm just never *sure* about anything."

"Oh," Shouto says.

"Oh?" Midoriya's covering his face, his elbows bent upward. "Is that all you have to say?"

"Sorry," Shouto says. "I'm just. Relieved, I guess."

"Why are you relieved?"

"Because you're just as confused about this as I am, and for pretty much the same reasons."

Midoriya snorts with laughter.

"You were my first friend," Shouto says, and Midoriya goes quiet. "So, even though I don't feel like this about any of the others, I've always figured that was the reason."

"Well, if it helps, I don't feel like this for *my* first friend," Midoriya says wryly.

Shouto's first thought is Uraraka, but then he remembers. "You and Bakugou were friends when you were younger, weren't you?"

"Guess so." Midoriya runs his fingers through his cat's fur. "Anyway…

it's just weird. I've been sort of wondering this already, and then tonight happened and I'm even more confused because it feels like everyone else knows more about this than I do, so I just wonder if they're right and we should be dating or whatever."

"You said you didn't want to," Shouto points out. "And neither do I, so let's not. What *do* you want to do? Because I'm fine with this. I don't need any more than this."

"Depends on what 'this' is." Midoriya slings his arm over his eyes with a sigh.

"Looking out for each other," Shouto says. "Sharing things. Sleeping like this, if we need to. We should spar again, too, I've missed that." He turns his head, angling it downward so he can see Midoriya. "What about you? What do you want?"

"The same, I guess," Midoriya says. "Hope you're okay with me falling asleep on you, because that's probably gonna keep happening."

"And that's another thing," Shouto says in a slightly strangled voice. "Why the *hell* do you feel safe with me?"

Midoriya's elbow jabs him in the side. "Hey, it's your own fault. You're the one who keeps showing up whenever I'm in mortal danger."

"My mistake," Shouto says dryly, and gets jabbed again.

"Besides," Midoriya says after a moment. "It's not just… physical safety. It—it's more like… well. How'd you feel when I started talking again? Be honest."

Shouto blinks, surprised by the question. "I was… glad. It means you're feeling better. Healing. Not much besides that. I'm not that good at sign, but you're good at making yourself understood."

"See? It's stuff like that."

He says it as if that clears it right up, but it doesn't. "I don't follow," Shouto admits.

"Everyone's so relieved, and it's such a big deal, and—" Midoriya's voice catches. "Even just now. 'Good to have you back, Midoriya,' as if I've been gone this entire time just because I wasn't talking. And I *know* he didn't mean it like that, it's just—they get worried, all the

time, when I do stuff like that." His frustration is nearly palpable. "I do things that aren't pretty, they don't look nice or sound nice, because they help me deal with things and get through stuff like that, and everyone looks at me like they're *scared* for me and it just makes me want to hide that stuff so they'll *stop looking at me like that.*"

Shouto finds, to his vague surprise, that his hand has found Midoriya's shoulder.

"But you… don't look at me like that," Midoriya says. "You started learning sign just to talk to me. Do you even know how much that meant to me?"

"I'm not that good."

Midoriya reaches up to pat his elbow. "That's okay, I'll help you. It's not like this is never going to happen again, anyway." He takes a deep breath, and lets it out again. "You always do stuff like this. I don't know if it's because you're the same way or you know what it's like, it just… makes me feel like I'm normal."

"You make perfect sense to me," Shouto answers, because he isn't sure what else to say to that.

"Thanks," Midoriya says softly.

He doesn't go back to his own room.

Izuku is out of excuses.

His voice is back, he's surrounded by friends, his secret is slightly less of one than it was before, and Iida lives just upstairs.

There's no reason not to talk to him, to tell him the truth—the full truth, the truth that Izuku knows but Mom doesn't and therefore Iida doesn't. But he keeps quiet, because he's a coward, and because Iida is too polite to ask.

Tensei pulls him aside on Saturday, because apparently it's gotten obvious or Rei told him or—doesn't matter. Maybe Tensei's noticed because Izuku has been avoiding him, too.

"You don't have to," Tensei tells him. "You know that, right? Because at the end of the day it's your quirk, and Tenya found out by accident anyway. You don't—you don't owe anyone anything."

Except Izuku can read between the lines. He can hear the hesitance and reluctance in Tensei's voice. He can read the way he says *You don't have to* instead of *Don't do it.* Because Tensei is selfless and kind, like any true hero should be, and he'd never try to force Izuku to do something he doesn't want to. But Tensei wants it.

He wants his brother to know.

And deep down, Izuku wants to tell him, if only to free himself from the prickling, choking guilt of his own silence. But every time he tries, every time he even thinks about trying, he might as well be mute again.

On Sunday, he sets up his game system in the common room. They have permission in that Aizawa didn't include video games in the comprehensive list of things they were not allowed to do in the dorms, and Izuku figures it's easier to ask forgiveness if it comes to that.

He has no other obligations. Most of his classmates are out or with family. Todoroki's gone most of the day to visit his mother. Even Iida himself goes home, so there's a bit less guilt about avoiding him.

He's played *Journey* more times than he can count, because it's easily the most low-stress, calming game he's ever played, and that's what he needs right now. Rei plays with Mika on the floor. All in all, it's a quiet afternoon.

Around half past one, he hears footsteps come in, and the cushions sag beside him.

"Heya, Deku," Uraraka says.

Izuku grins at her. "Hey. What's up?"

"Nothing much," she says. "Kind of bored. Almost everybody's gone, so…"

"Yeah." He pauses the game. "Wanna play?"

"Sure! This is *Journey*, right? Everybody says it's good."

Izuku hands her the controller and gives her a rundown of the premise and all the controls. Uraraka picks it up quickly, and spends the next ten minutes just exploring the landscape, sending her character leaping over sand and ruins.

“Hey Deku,” she says after a while.

“Yeah?”

“Are there any ghosts in here right now?”

Izuku jumps. She knows, he knows that she knows, and technically they’ve sort of talked about it before, but this is the first time she’s really asked. “Uh. Yeah. Just one. Her name’s Rei.”

“Cool. Hi, Rei.” Uraraka can’t see the way Rei beams. “What’s she like?”

“She was… nine,” he says. “It was a while ago. But she’s, um… she’s the girl you saw.”

“Oh.” Uraraka stops playing, and lowers the controller. “She was in a drawing you made when you were little, right?”

“I met her when I was five,” Izuku says. “She’s been with me ever since.”

“Do they always do that?” Uraraka asks. “Stick around?”

“Sometimes. Not usually. Most ghosts have better things to do than hang around me.”

“Like what?”

Izuku sits back on the couch, shifting over as Rei hops up to sit next to him. “Move on, most of the time. Or if they do stay, they follow people they actually knew, when they were alive.”

“Oh,” Ochako says. “Does, um… does anyone we know… have ghosts like that?”

Izuku feels his heartbeat in his throat. “Yeah.”

“Do you ever feel like you want to tell them?”

His throat feels uncomfortably thick. “Sometimes it’s all I can think about.”

She isn’t going to ask, he realizes. She’s going to dance around it unless he says something first.

“Have you ever tried?” she asks. She isn’t playing anymore; the robed

figure stands motionless in the sand, and Uraraka's eyes are on Izuku.

"Yes," Izuku says. "It was a long time ago, and… and they didn't have a ghost. I told them because… well, at the time, it felt like I had to, and I might as well." He swallows, but the hard lump in his throat remains. "It didn't go well."

"Deku—"

"And ever since then," he says. "Ever since then, every time I think about telling, every time I find someone and think, maybe they'll understand, maybe it'll be okay this time, I… I think of what happened the first time. And I just… I just *can't*. It won't come out, no matter how much I want to, or how much they deserve to know." His eyes sting. "That's why you and Iida only found out on accident, and even though you know now and it's fine, even though I should know better, it's still hard just to think about. Like if I say too much or I push too hard, it'll go wrong again."

"Well… maybe it's *because* we found out on accident," Uraraka says.

"What?"

"You didn't get to face your fears," she says. "It just happened, while you weren't even there. Maybe you're still scared of what will happen if you tell, because you still don't *know* what will happen if you tell."

She's smart, Rei says. *You should listen to her.*

"I guess that makes sense." Izuku can't help smiling a little, though his mouth slips into a frown again shortly. "Doesn't tell me what I should do about it, though."

"Tell someone," Uraraka says, as if it's really that simple. She must see the look on his face, because she presses further. "I mean, not just anyone. Tell someone you *know* is going to accept it. Someone you trust. Someone you feel safest with, no matter what."

Izuku goes tense. "You're saying I should tell—?"

She raises both hands, one of them still holding the game controller. "I only said what I said. If someone popped into your head while I said it, then that's on you, not me."

Rei gestures vigorously at her. *She's right. Listen to her. She's smarter than you, do it.*

Izuku gives Uraraka his most wounded look. “You should know that Rei is siding with you, and that means you’re both ganging up on me, and that’s totally unfair.”

Smiling primly, Uraraka goes back to playing. “Thank goodness you’ve had someone sensible with you all these years.”

Izuku snorts, but doesn’t argue with her.

Monday’s training is every bit as vigorous as the week before, but by now they’re used to it.

Izuku starts his own training off with Rei. He’s getting better at this; when he first tried it, it felt vague and nebulous, something he could perform without completely comprehending what he was doing. But now, he’s starting to internalize the feeling. It’s something he can possibly quantify—which means it’s something he can master and improve.

Of course, that means he has to stop eventually. He knows it’s time to take a break when he sees Sero blink and do a double-take in his direction. His heart seizes, but then his classmate shakes his head as if to clear it, shrugs, and goes back to his own exercises.

“This is kind of counterproductive,” he murmurs to Rei. “We’re trying to work out special moves, but even if I figure this out, I’ll still have nothing I can show for it.” When she looks put-upon, he shoots her a glare. “Hey, besides, I can’t just rely on you to help me *all* the time. I need to work things out just for myself, too.”

She floats up and pinches his nose, then flounces off to bother Hino.

From there, Izuku trains with One For All alone. His best bet, as far as he knows, is to keep increasing his capacity to wield it. The fast he reaches higher percentages, the fast he can work out some proper moves with it. Maybe even ranged attacks with wind pressure, the way All-Might does.

Speaking of All-Might…

Izuku goes looking for him, and finds him apparently deep in conversation with Ojiro. They seem busy, and it doesn’t look as if they’ll finish up quickly, so he signals Nana instead. When she catches sight of him, she waves back and comes to join him at the foot of one of Cementoss’s raised platforms. Most of his classmates are elsewhere;

Tokoyami's wielding Dark Shadow on top of the platform with some of the overhead lights dimmed, and that's enough to make everyone keep their distance. Out of sight and earshot from most of the others, Izuku feels safer talking to her without raising any eyebrows.

She seems distracted as she joins him, glancing over her shoulder even as she pays attention to Izuku.

"Everything all right?" he asks.

"I'll… get back to you on that, beansprout," she says. "What's up?"

"Same as usual. Just—do you think there's anything I can do besides grinding in order to take on more of One For All at a time?" he asks.

"Depends," she says, with one last look over her shoulder. "Where are you at, at this point?"

"I started out at five percent, and I think by now I'm around six or seven," he says. "So. Steady progress, but slower than I'd like. If it takes me a full term to go up by two, then by the time I graduate, I'll be at—what, twenty-three percent? That's less than a quarter, that's *nothing*."

Nana puts her hand on his head before he can work up his frustration. "Hey, slow your roll, tater-tot, your growth isn't going to be a steady slope, okay? There'll be peaks and curves. This was your first term—and yeah, it was an intense term, but you've been finding your footing. You just need some clear goals in mind. So—what, exactly, do you want out of One For All in your immediate future? And don't say 'increased power output,' because that's obvious. What's something specific that you want to be able to do with it?"

He thinks for a moment. "Ranged attacks," he says. "I'm good in close quarters, but I can't attack from a distance unless I send a ghost or injure myself."

"Great!" Nana claps her hands. "Now, in my day I needed a bare minimum of thirty-two percent for a half-decent wind-pressure shot. Toshi needs—er, Tosh needed around twenty-five-ish. You? I'd say your magic number's twenty."

Izuku suppresses a sigh. "That's still more than ten percent to go—"

"Fucking *move*, dumbass!"

A hand closes on his upper arm, so tight it's painful, and *drags*. Izuku's first instinct is to fight, before Nana looks up, flickers, and starts shoving him back as well. He follows her gaze just in time to see Dark Shadow finish slicing off a corner of the platform. The rubble crashes to the ground where he'd been standing just moments before.

Izuku can't move. It's not that he's that shocked that Tokoyami nearly sent him to Recovery Girl, but more the fact that Bakugou still hasn't let go of his arm, and it's starting to hurt.

"Are you fucking braindead, Deku?" Bakugou snarls. "What the fuck were you just standing there for?"

"Let go," Izuku murmurs. It's hard to shout when he has to consciously think about breathing.

"Then fucking pay attention next time! Shitty Hair was yelling his ass off at you and you stood there like a fucking moron! What's the matter, are you *deaf* on top of—?"

"Bakugou," Izuku says. "Let go of me."

"Are you even listening to—"

Izuku clacks his teeth together, hard enough to feel the click in his whole jaw. It's not meant to be a threat, just a sound and sensation to drive back the growing static in his head, but Bakugou releases him roughly anyway.

"Thanks," he says tightly, and steps out of reach before Bakugou can grab him again. The static recedes. "Thanks for the warning."

He hurries away with Nana hovering over him, dimly aware of Rei rushing back to his side.

"Sorry," Nana murmurs to him. "I'm sorry, I didn't—I should've been paying attention, so I could warn you, but I was distracted and—"

"It's fine," he says.

He feels Bakugou's eyes on him as he hurries away.

"Does All-Might seem off to you?" Todoroki asks.

"Yes," Izuku says bluntly. "Why wouldn't he?"

“You wanted to talk to him earlier, right?” Todoroki says. “I saw you looking at him a few times, but you never went up to him.”

“Yeah, what are you getting at?”

“It feels like it’s harder to talk to him now,” Todoroki admits. “He just… he seems more fragile now than he used to.”

“He’s *not*,” Izuku says. Todoroki’s sitting at the foot of the futon, and he’s too limp and comfortable to get up and reach him, but Izuku can still jab him in the side with his foot. “This form of his isn’t new—you know that, right? He’s been that way for years, it’s just that now he can’t hide it anymore.”

Todoroki swats his foot away. “It’s not so much how he looks,” he says. “That’s part of it, but it feels like something’s wrong past just surface level. He just seems unhappy.”

Izuku purses his lips, worried. Todoroki’s… not *wrong*, of course. All-Might has been making him feel cautious lately. He just figured that it was taking All-Might some time to get used to being quirkless again, but there could be more to it.

“That villain, All-For-One,” Todoroki says, and there’s a hint of caution to it. “You were there, for a little while, with him and All-Might. Did they… say anything?”

“Plenty,” Izuku says. “That’s why I don’t blame All-Might for acting off. But…” He runs his hand through his hair. “I did run before they finished. He might’ve said something between that point and when All-Might took him down.”

He hasn’t spent a lot of time thinking about All-Might, that’s the problem. He’s used to Nana letting him know if All-Might’s in trouble, but… well, she’s seemed off, too. Besides asking Izuku to humor him when All-Might first showed up for training, she hasn’t said much to him.

All For One was the one that killed her, he reminds himself. *Who even knows how it felt to her, seeing him in the flesh again?*

His tongue itches to mention that, but of course he can’t, not to Todoroki.

Except… he could, couldn’t he?

Someone you trust, Uraraka had said. Someone you feel safest with, no matter what.

He'll sleep on it.

As it happens, he does sleep—right in that spot, lying on Todoroki's futon. He didn't go in meaning to sleep there, but he's tired from training, tired from worrying about All-Might and Nana and Bakugou and who knows what else. It's criminally easy to fall asleep around Todoroki. He'll have to be more careful in the future.

It's not enough to keep the nightmares back, but at least they go easy on him tonight. He doesn't dream of All-For-One or Toga or Dabi. He doesn't dream of Compress's marble prisons. He dreams of the closet, of hands holding him in a tight grip, only releasing him as the door shuts and cuts off his escape, of whispers and cold fingers touching him, even when he struggles. He dreams of the crawling horror in the darkness, one that he can hear and fee but never quite see..

He's had this dream more times than he can count. It's his oldest nightmare by far. It may very well follow him to the grave.

When he wakes up there are hands gripping him again, and he struggles on instinct before he registers that one is hot and the other is cold. Mika noses at his face, and Todoroki releases him before he can work himself up into a proper panic.

"You all right?" There's a hand in his hair. "Midoriya?"

Izuku sits up. The light flickers on—Rei's standing by the switch. Todoroki jerks his head up, frowning in confusion.

"That's odd," he says. "Must be something wrong with the wiring." The hand that was in Izuku's hair now rests firmly on his shoulder. "Not that I'm complaining. You all right?"

Izuku nods wordlessly, but doesn't lie back down. He curls into a tight ball, knees pressed firmly to his chest, and tucks his head in as he waits for the fear to pass. It's not immediate.

"Might help to talk, if you're up for it," Todoroki says softly, but when Izuku doesn't answer, he doesn't press.

Eventually, Izuku takes a deep breath, heaves himself to his feet, and goes to switch the lights back off. At the very least, he tries. Rei stands in his way and scowls at him. Izuku glares back, then steps around her

and hits the switch.

He realizes, then, that he can't blame it on faulty wiring.

Too late, he thinks as he returns to the futon. *Maybe he won't ask.*

He isn't wrong. That's not what Todoroki asks at all.

"So…" Todoroki begins hesitantly as Izuku sits back down. "Is 'Kacchan' a person, or…?"

Izuku freezes.

"It's just," Todoroki continues, when Izuku doesn't reply. "This isn't the first time I've heard you say it. It's not that you say it a lot—it's been *maybe* three times. I was just wondering if it meant something to you. Whenever you do, you sort of… lash out when I try to touch you."

Someone you trust. Someone you feel safest with.

He opens his mouth, and shuts it again. The closet and the crawling and the hands and the whispers are still fresh in his mind, brought back to the front of it by fear and nightmares.

What if, he thinks. *What if it goes wrong again? What if he doesn't believe me?*

He blinks, and is surprised when tears fall. A shiver runs through him as he tries to wipe them away.

"You don't have to answer that," Todoroki tells him.

What if he does?

Izuku blinks the wet blur from his eyes, and sees Rei standing in the dark just a few feet away. Waiting.

He opens his mouth.

"It's a long story." His voice cracks. "And I—there are things that…"

The closet is there, in the forefront of his mind, tattooed into the backs of his eyelids.

He wouldn't. Todoroki wouldn't. No one could, even if they wanted to. There's no closet here.

The entire room is a wet, dark blur now.

“What would you say,” Izuku begins, “if I told you that—that I’ve been lying about some things? That—” His voice catches, his throat closes as if it would rather strangle him than let him speak. “That my quirk isn’t what you think it is?”

The silence that passes is almost enough to kill his courage.

“What do you mean?” Todoroki asks warily.

“What if I told you that I see things?” Izuku goes on, before he can lose heart completely. “People, that no one else can see, or hear, or touch?” He doesn’t—can’t—look at Todoroki, so he looks at Rei instead. “A-and they—they talk to me. Sometimes they tell me things. Sometimes they ask for help. And—” He has to choke out the rest. “And sometimes, they tell me how they died.”

Silence.

Izuku waits.

He can’t be sure how long he waits, because he can’t be sure of the passage of time at all. His mind slows things down, and every heartbeat feels like hours passing.

“It’s bullshit, right?” he says, before Todoroki can say it first. “It’s stupid bullshit and impossible and I’m a liar.” The sad thing is that he *is* a liar—just not right now.

He waits, swallowing as his heartbeat pulses in his throat, waits and waits and waits until finally—

“…You know, that’s what I thought *you* were going to say.”

he jumps at the sound of Todoroki’s voice, and forces himself to look. “W-what?”

Todoroki’s eyes don’t flash in the dark like his, but Izuku can still see his friend watching him. “When I told you about my father, and what kind of person he is behind closed doors. That was mostly for me, not you. Because I didn’t think you’d believe me.”

“What?” Izuku’s voice cracks. He’s still sort of crying; he isn’t sobbing and breathless, but his throat aches and the tears haven’t stopped yet. “I don’t—why wouldn’t I—?”

“You like heroes,” Todoroki says. “Even before I knew you, I knew that. And Endeavor is the second strongest. I didn’t think you’d believe what I said about him.” He glances down at his hands, twisted together in his lap. “And then you did. You didn’t even *question* it.”

Izuku blinks and wipes his eyes again. It hadn’t occurred to him at the time, that Todoroki might be lying. He met Endeavor shortly afterward, but he hadn’t needed to.

“So I guess if you could take my side when we weren’t even friends, when I challenging you in front of everyone, then it’d be hypocritical of me to call you a liar now.” He pauses. “It’s… it’s kind of a lot, what you’re implying. But I think that just makes me believe you more.”

The leaden weight is fading, losing density until Izuku can almost start to breathe again. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve seen you lie before, I think,” Todoroki continues. “When you say you’re fine even when you’re not. Or you brush off someone questioning something. All the times I’ve seen you do it, it’s to make people stop asking questions, and stop paying attention to you. This is only making me pay more attention.”

Izuku’s crying again. He’s not sure if he’ll ever stop.

“So I guess, to answer your question,” Todoroki says. “I’d say that we have a classmate with a shadow demon living inside him, and we just watched our teacher fight a centuries-old supervillain who could steal quirks. So… we can’t really define what’s impossible, can we?”

Izuku grabs a handful of Todoroki’s shirt and drags him into a hug. He can apologize for smearing snot and tears on his chest later.

“Er,” Todoroki says, when Izuku’s last crying fit starts to subside and he’s lost track of how long they’ve been sitting here on Todoroki’s futon. “So… you see ghosts.”

Izuku nods into his chest.

“Actual dead ghosts.”

“There isn’t really another kind,” Izuku croaks.

“Does anyone else know?”

“Iida, and Uraraka,” he answers. “I didn’t tell them, they found out

when they visited my mom while I was gone. But you're the first—" He stops. "You're the second person I've ever told, outside of my family."

The question is inevitable, of course. "Who was the first?"

Reluctantly, Izuku lets go of him and leans back, wiping the dampness from his face. He's tired and a little thirsty from crying, and part of him wants to burrow under blankets and never wake up again. But he can answer this last question. After all, he still hasn't answered the first.

"I had this friend."

The closet is back, but it's not in his face anymore. It's not blinding him. The fear can't touch him anymore, because he's past what would have frightened him, and it never came to pass.

"Maybe we weren't really friends. I don't think he really liked me that much, looking back. But we went to the same elementary school. He had so many friends, and I didn't, except for him."

"I didn't tell people about what I could do. My mom tried to hint at it to doctors when I was little, but they were never very, um, open to the idea. There wasn't any way for us to prove that what I saw was real. So… nobody knew about it."

He takes a deep breath. "I-in elementary school, down the hall from homeroom, there was this—this closet. I don't remember what it was for. I just remember that I hated that closet. I hated it more than anything, and believe me, I hated a lot of stuff about school back then. But that closet was the worst, because—I could hear things in it. And nobody else could, so I knew it had to be ghosts, but I—I never saw them. I don't know if they ever came out. All I know is that they were dead, and they were *angry*. They were already there when I first got there, and they were there when I left, and they never stopped screaming, not once." He feels like he should cry here, but he doesn't. He's already out of tears. "They're probably still there, even now."

Todoroki doesn't interrupt, not even to ask questions. Izuku is grateful for that.

"The shortest way to the cafeteria was by walking past that closet," Izuku says. "I took the long way around, all the time, so I wouldn't have to go near it. I tried to be sneaky about it, but people noticed. *K-Kacchan* noticed. And he asked me why I went the stupid way

around."

He pauses, but Todoroki still says nothing.

"So I told him." Izuku's voice cracks. "Not right away. I thought about it a lot. And I thought we were friends, we'd known each other since we were tiny, so I thought it'd be okay." Izuku swallows, but his throat and mouth are dry. "He didn't believe me."

He hears Todoroki exhale, but his friend still waits for him to finish.

"He thought I was lying. Pretending I had a quirk so they'd stop teasing me about it. So he—he thought it'd be funny to—" Again, he has to stop. He's dimly aware of Rei sitting beside him, hugging his arm, and Mika climbing into his lap and kneading at his thigh until the words come out in a rush. "He got his friends. And he—they—I was yelling the whole time, and they wouldn't let go. He wouldn't let go, I even *kicked* him and he still wouldn't let go. They just shoved me in the closet and shut the door."

This time, he's pretty sure Todoroki stops breathing for a moment.

"I don't remember what happened, most of the time," Izuku says. "Sometimes I do, a little, when I'm—when I wake up from a nightmare, or if I'm seconds away from a panic attack. But eventually it goes away again." He pauses to take a deep breath. "The weird thing is, the door wasn't blocked. It locked from the inside. I should've been able to get out, I think they thought I would. But I just… didn't. I didn't get out until the janitor found me at the end of the day, and by then I'd been in there for three hours. There were welts and scratches on my face, and everyone said I must've made them myself. My mom says I didn't let her hug me until a couple weeks later, and it took me eight months to start talking again." He falls silent. It feels as if he's been talking for hours.

The first thing Todoroki says in response is this:

"So is Kacchan short for Katsuki?"

Izuku's heart sinks. "I was hoping you wouldn't ask me that."

"It makes sense," Todoroki says. His voice is calm, but there's a tension buried deep within it that makes Izuku uneasy. "He's your childhood friend. And he's the only person I've ever seen you act afraid of. You—" He pauses, breathing in like he's realized something. "You freeze up whenever he grabs you."

“Can you blame me?” Izuku says bitterly, and sighs. “Look, just… don’t say anything to him, okay? This is all between me and him, and he was seven years old and selfish and stupid and he didn’t know what he was doing. Hell, if you take out the ghosts, that wasn’t even the worst thing anyone did to me back then. It was just an unlocked closet, as far as any of them knew it’d be two minutes out of my day —”

“It was eight months,” Todoroki says coldly. “And you still have nightmares about it. You’re still afraid of him.”

“I’m afraid of *everything*,” Izuku hisses. “I’m *always* afraid, all the time. Bakugou’s not special, and I’m not gonna feed his ego by acting like he is.” He sighs harshly. “He’s beginning, very very slowly, to act like less of an asshole than he used to be. If he gets to a point where I think he won’t just shrug it off, then yeah, maybe I’ll bring it up. But until then, he can do whatever he wants on his own time, as long as he keeps leaving me the hell alone.” Gradually, Izuku forces the tension out of his shoulders and lets them slump down. “I told you because you asked, and because I trust you. I don’t need or want you starting anything over this.”

“But still—”

Exasperated, Izuku flops back down and nearly brains himself on the floor when he misses the pillow. “Todoroki, would you like me to pull a Kouta and punch your dad in the scrotum? Is that what you want?”

Todoroki *snorts*, and kicks his foot lightly. “Of course not, don’t be stupid.”

“Then just… drop it, okay? Let me deal with my own fraught, tragic childhood, and if I need to punch out my feelings, I’ll come to you.”

“Fine,” Todoroki fumes, and lies down next to him. “…Did you seriously just use the word ‘fraught’?”

Izuku yanks the comforter back up, and halfheartedly tries to smother him with it. “See if I ever open my heart to *you* again.”

But eventually, when it’s silent again but for breathing and Mika’s purring, Izuku presses the side of his head to Todoroki’s shoulder.

“Thanks,” he murmurs. “Really. This means—this kind of means everything to me.”

Todoroki finds his hand and squeezes it lightly. Izuku falls asleep before he lets go.

Shouto wakes up to Midoriya slipping out from under the comforter. He's on his belly, face mashed into the pillow, as Mika walks along his spine and settles between his shoulder blades.

"Don't get up, it's five," his friend says quietly.

Shouto makes a noise that is, he assumes, appropriately questioning.

"There's something I have to do," Midoriya says. "Well, a couple things. But this one comes first. Don't worry about Mika, I'll be back in time to feed her."

Midoriya ruffles his hair lightly. Shouto barely stays awake long enough to hear the door close behind him.

Summer's heat still lingers, clinging to the air as the season finally runs its course, but it's early enough to be cool.

Tenya made sure to clear things with Aizawa-sensei when he first arrived in the dorms; curfew restrictions last from ten p.m. to five a.m., which leaves him with plenty of time for a morning jog before training. Without his quirk, of course. He stands at the edge of the wooded area surrounding the campus and stretches, breathing in deeply. He's glad the school has areas like this; not only are there plenty of slopes for light endurance training, but the scenery is pleasant. Running on a track or a treadmill simply can't compare.

He finishes his stretches.

"Morning, Iida. Mind if I join you?"

Tenya jumps at the sound of Midoriya's voice. Heavens, he doesn't even have his earbuds in yet, and Midoriya still managed to sneak up on him. He has to wonder if that's something he's practiced, or it's a natural talent.

Or if it's merely an aspect of his ability.

And that leads to other questions, like—did Midoriya already know that Iida runs in the morning, or did he… ask?

And if he did ask, then who did he—?

“Good morning, Midoriya!” Tenya puts on his brightest smile. “I don’t mind at all. I’d enjoy the company, actually. Only—” He frowns. “It’s awfully early. Have you gotten enough sleep?”

“I’ve had worse,” Midoriya says with a grin, and doesn’t seem to realize how worrying that answer is. “I jogged in the morning before moving to the dorms, so it’s probably good to stay in the habit. I’ll follow your lead?”

Tenya leaves his earbuds in his pockets. “Just a quick run through the woods. I hope you don’t mind slopes.”

The two of them set off, falling in step with each other easily. “I took Bell along on my runs, before,” Tenya says, because talking and jogging at the same time has never been an issue for him. “I wish I could’ve brought her with me, like you and Kouda did with your animals, but—dogs have more direct emotional needs than cats and rabbits, I believe. I wouldn’t want to leave her on her own during training or classes. And my mother loves having her around…”

He carries on, and Midoriya listens attentively and nods along, and even nearly matches his conversation with his own contributions, which bespeaks excellent cardio.

And—Tenya *has* missed this. Having company when he jogs. He’s found that most people can’t carry on a conversation while running, at least not quite as easily and himself and… and other people with the right training or the right quirk. It’s something he’s missed, desperately, while simultaneously having no idea who to ask for it, much less how. Talking to Bell is almost as good, but of course, a dog can’t answer back.

And without her… well, without her, all he can do most days is plug his ears with music and run fast enough for the burn in his muscles to take up all of his attention.

But Midoriya’s company is fantastic! Almost nothing beats the company of a good friend on a morning run. And Midoriya has some excellent thoughts on quirk theory to share, which certainly doesn’t hurt in the least.

They stop at the halfway point, for water and to watch the sun finish rising between the trees. Midoriya leans against a length of fencing along the trail, a barrier against a short drop in ground level, and breathes deeply.

It's not the first time Tenya has looked at his friend and been tempted to ask—on account of the fact that it's not the first time Tenya has looked at Midoriya. But he holds it in, as always. Midoriya only just started talking again Friday night, and part of Tenya is afraid that one wrong move, one step too far, will send Midoriya back into his shell, back into silence.

It's such a stupid thing to be afraid of. He knows Midoriya is strong. He admires Midoriya's strength, even more now than he did before he knew the truth. Midoriya saved him, from Stain and from himself. Midoriya was caught in the thick of a nighttime battle that Tenya barely even saw. Midoriya fell into the hands of the darkest villains any of them have ever seen, and came out swinging.

So really, it's not Midoriya he's worried about.

It's mostly just himself.

"Well, we should probably head back," Tenya says.

"Not yet." Midoriya is still leaning against the fence, staring down at his water bottle as if he expects it to offer engaging conversation. "Look, Iida—" He raises his head, and his eyes flicker to the side and back again.

It's not the first time he's seen Midoriya do that. He's seen that since before Kamino. Since before Hosu.

Since—

"There's something you've been wanting to ask me," Midoriya says. "Something I've been putting off answering. I'm not sure why—the hard part was already done when I got back, and you already know the part of it that has to do with me, so it's not like there's any turning back." He hops up and sits on the fence post, feet dangling off the ground, and after a moment Tenya goes to sit on the horizontal beam next to him. Midoriya gives him a sad little grin, mouth trembling slightly. "I guess I just never felt ready to have this conversation, you know? But… sometimes people deserve to know things, whether you're ready to tell them or not." He knocks his heel against the post. "But I'm ready now, and the answer's yes."

Tenya stops breathing for a moment.

Midoriya waits for him to answer, and when he doesn't, he knocks his heels against the post again and continues. "Remember when you

were worried about—about him dying? Not just your brother, but the hero Ingenium? And I told you—"

"To take his name," Tenya whispers. "So he could live on through me."

"Yeah," Midoriya says. "Well. I didn't come up with that myself. I was just passing along the message. I was scared you'd take it badly, but you didn't."

Tenya's chest hitches again, and his eyes burn. "Y-you know," he says, voice rough—from running, of course. "I always wondered. That day, when—after the Sports Festival. When I came in, and you were already there, and—and I was so *ready*, to put on a brave face, and keep everyone from worrying. I practiced in the mirror before I left for school. And you—you took one look at me…"

"No," Midoriya says quietly. "It wasn't you I was looking at."

"I—" Tenya's hand goes to his mouth, as if that can keep back the inevitable. "Midoriya—" He stops, takes a deep breath, and then another and another until he's reasonably sure his voice won't shake out of control. "Is—is he… here? Right now?" Tenya's heart clenches with dread, and he almost doesn't want to hear the answer, because *what if he's too late—*

But Midoriya gives him another sad little smile. "He never left."

The tears come rushing out before Tenya has the chance to breathe.

No wonder Midoriya joined him now, on a jog through the empty woods long before anyone else has woken up. He would have thought it was to preserve the secret, but maybe it was also to give Tenya some solitude.

Midoriya's hand rests on his shoulder, steadying him. "Well, that's not quite true," he continues. "He left you once, very briefly, in Hosu. And that was just to come find me. I'd like to think I would've gotten to you without him leading the way, but I guess we'll never know."

Tenya reaches up and grasps at the hand on his shoulder like a lifeline.

"He also wants you to know that he leaves often enough to give you an appropriate amount of privacy. He learned his lesson that time you threw a bar of soap at him when you were six."

Tenya laughs in the midst of his tears. “Does he—” He stops. “*N-Nii-san*, did you know I was trying to miss on purpose?”

“Well, you could’ve fooled him.”

For a while Tenya simply sits there, perched on a fence in the woods with his glasses in hand, laughing and crying for the exact same reason while his close friend keeps him from toppling off. It’s easily the most ridiculous thing he’s done, and it loosens so many of the knots inside of him that he loses count of how many he had to start.

When the hysterics start to subside, Tenya wipes his eyes and steadies himself with a few calming breaths. Midoriya’s hand doesn’t move from its spot.

“He’s proud of you,” Midoriya says. “You know that, right? You scared him for a little while, and he wishes you hadn’t done that, but he also understands, and it didn’t make him any less proud. And he wants you to know—he’s not staying because he’s unhappy. He’s staying because he doesn’t want to miss out on what you’re going to become.”

“Midoriya,” Tenya rasps. “A-and Tensei. We *just* stopped for water. If you two don’t stop soon, I’m going to end up dehydrated anyway.”

“Sorry—”

Tenya tugs him into a hug, so suddenly that he almost pulls his friend off the post entirely.

He imagines, just for a moment, feeling a different but nonetheless familiar hand on his shoulder, and it’s not so very difficult at all.

Chapter End Notes

> CW: off-color jokes, uncomfortable situations, awkward kissing, discussions of asexuality, discussions of past death, trauma response, nightmares, past bullying description of childhood trauma, grief.

Chapter 45

Chapter Notes

chaaaaro

irene-draws

coffee-and-ramen (2)

theluckybell (2) (3)

fritternx

phrazmur

fingerspellingtopassthetime

AmateurArtist (2)

littleblueberryartist

As always, this story has a TV Tropes page!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuku isn't sure why he stays after the day's training is done. He isn't planning on telling—not yet. It's been a lot already, telling Todoroki and coming clean with Iida, and he doesn't regret it, but he needs time, still. He needs to think this through.

But All-Might is still acting off, and it's not in Izuku's nature to leave things be.

His friends pause to wait for him as the class exits the training facility for the day, but Izuku waves them on. Uraraka waves back, Todoroki gives him a nod, and Iida's gentle grip lingers on his shoulder for a moment before he moves on with Tensei trailing him. Izuku marches in place a bit until the last stragglers (Kaminari and Sero) leave him behind, and slips back to where he last saw All-Might. The teachers are gathered in discussion—Aizawa-sensei, Cementoss, Ectoplasm, and All-Might—and Izuku lets his steps fall audibly. All-Might sees him approach first.

The cast on his arm is still in place, but the sling is gone and the rest of his bandages have been removed. Physically he's been improving, but the loss of bandages doesn't take away the shadows on his face or the curve to his spine. Nana hovers over him, silently worrying, as if she's afraid he'll keel over at any moment.

As Izuku approaches, Aizawa-sensei looks up and sees All-Might staring. His homeroom teacher follows his gaze until he spots Izuku as well, and his face shifts briefly into something that Izuku can't quite read at this distance. Aizawa glances toward All-Might as if expecting something, then rolls his eyes and gives him a light shove in Izuku's direction. All-Might's steps stumble a bit toward Izuku's approach, and he glances back at the other teachers with a bewildered look on his face, but they're already moving off.

When he turns back to Izuku, the shadows have shifted, and now he looks a bit more shamefaced than simply miserable.

"What was that about?" Izuku asks as he joins his mentor in the rapidly emptying facility.

"Oh, nothing," All-Might says. "Aizawa was simply pushing me to do something I've been putting off." He hesitates, picking at the edge of the bandage wrapping on his arm. "Ah. Talking to you, to be exact." Pausing again, he heaves a brief sigh. "I'm sorry, my boy. I'm sorry I didn't talk to you about this so much sooner."

"A-about what, exactly?" Izuku asks, with a fearful look at Rei and Nana. He can't account for the instinctive fear that rises within him, because there's absolutely no way for All-Might to know about *that*, but he also can't help spooking a little anyway.

"About your—your imprisonment," All-Might answers, as his hands twist together in agitation. "We saw each other on the beach afterward, but—well, we didn't really talk. You didn't have the chance to, and… considering what you saw, and what you went through, with All For One… are you all right, my boy?"

"Are you kidding me?" slips out before Izuku can stop it, and he simply gawks at All-Might for a second. "That's what I've been wanting to ask *you*."

"Ah, well, there's really no need to—"

"I know it's been hard," Izuku blurts out, then pulls back. This is dangerous territory he's headed for. If he says too much, he might

make things worse. “I know it’s—I mean, you lost the last of your quirk, and you’ve been forced to retire, and—and I use the internet, you know? I see what some people say, whether they’re mean and critical or just scared, but…” He swallows painfully. “You’ve been acting off ever since. I’m worried about you.”

All-Might blinks at him, clearly taken aback, then shakes his head. “I was afraid of this. It’s all backwards—I’m the one who’s supposed to be worrying about *you*, my boy, not the other way around.”

“Fine, it runs both ways. But… All-Might, I left before you took him down, and I know he kept talking to you while I was gone.” He searches All-Might’s face, then glances to Nana’s. “Did he say something?”

“Plenty,” All-Might rasps. “In fact, he said plenty while you were still there, remember?” He pauses. “You were with them for three days. Have you talked to anyone about it?”

Izuku’s throat begins to close, and he shrugs. “There’s nothing to talk about. He’s dead, so it doesn’t matter. He doesn’t matter.” All-Might’s still looking at him, and the weight of his gaze makes Izuku want to grind his teeth against his own words. “He lied a lot. He said some things that were true, but it was all twisted to try and push me to his side. He tried to get me to feel bad about myself, and blame myself or you or heroes or the world for things that were mostly his fault.” A realization strikes, and he barks out a quiet laugh. “Holy—he spent three days *negging* me, what a creep.”

All-Might huffs out an attempt at a laugh, and his hand falls upon Izuku’s shoulder and only trembles a little.

“Yeah, he does that,” Nana murmurs. “He has a knack for finding the right buttons to push.”

“It might’ve worked,” Izuku says quietly. “I think if—if I’d been alone…” *If the ghosts hadn’t been with me. If One For All hadn’t been with me. If no one had been there, not even Bakugou.* Rei slips her hand into his, and he squeezes it. “I knew he was wrong. I knew he was just playing me. But it was like I needed a constant reminder, or I’d forget, and…” His voice caught in his throat. “And that last day, when—when he had Ragdoll’s quirk? It threw him off, and I could just barely slip past him. I don’t know if I could’ve gotten through that by myself. I like to think I could’ve. But I don’t know.”

“You could have,” All-Might says gently. “I have faith in you. I saw

how you stood up to him. It—it terrified me, seeing you so close to him, speaking that way. But I could see in your face—he had no hold on you at all."

"I was angry," Izuku whispers. He's staring downward, away from All-Might's face. "I think I was more angry than I've ever been, in my whole life."

The hand on his shoulder squeezes lightly. "I know. I could tell. And… there was something I wanted to ask you. It's fine if you don't want to answer, but…" He purses his lips, seeming to brace himself. "You said something to him, before you ran. That he shouldn't have killed her. I was alarmed when you said that, because I thought it meant the worst for Ragdoll, but when I learned that she was all right, I was relieved but… confused. Were you talking about someone else?"

The truth hovers at the back of his throat, bracing itself to spring forward and fly free. He glances to the side, at Rei, and then at Nana. Rei watches him with steady black eyes, but Nana…

Nana's eyes are closed, and even from here Izuku can see her trembling. She looks scared. She looks anything but ready.

"I… had this friend, when I was younger," Izuku says. His throat feels every bit as rough and dry as sandpaper. Rei's hands are cold, but they don't shake. "I-I met her when I was five. I've always thought of her like my sister. But… but something happened to her, and I never knew what, until Kamino. Because when I escaped, I… I found a file on her, in that place. I found—I found out what happened, and I was always wondering, but—"

The hand on his shoulder becomes a hug, and Izuku squeezes back and swallows his guilt over his own cowardice. It's the truth. Not a single word of that was false, but a lie by omission is still a lie.

Tell him, he thinks, but he's tired. He told the truth to Todoroki and it ended better than he could have hoped, but it still left him shaky. His conversation with Iida this morning left him drained.

I'll tell him tomorrow, he thinks, and wonders bitterly if he'll ever let that tomorrow become a today.

Exhaustion hits him in a wave as he finally makes his way back to the dorm common room. His costume is stowed away, his clothes are loose and comfortable, and his hair is damp from the shower he took

at the training facility but mostly dried from the walk back. Once inside, he kicks off his shoes and makes a beeline for the couch to flop down on it. The action sends him sprawling limply across Todoroki's lap, and his friend shifts a little and rests the book he's reading between Izuku's shoulder blades.

"Workin' hard or hardly workin', Midoriya?" Kirishima chuckles. Izuku mumbles wordlessly in response.

"Did somebody say Midoriya?" Kaminari calls from another room. There's a flurry of footsteps—multiple people heading toward him—and Izuku raises his head to see Kaminari, Sero, and Ashido scrambling in with Kaminari in the lead. "Midoriya we need a fav—oh." He stops short, and while Ashido manages to swerve to avoid crashing into him, Sero isn't as quick. "Wait. You and Todoroki—you guys said you weren't a thing, right? Did that change?"

"Nothing changed," Todoroki says, without looking up from his book.

"We're not dating," Izuku says flatly. "We had a conversation and everything."

"Really?" Sero looks skeptical. "'Cause, no offense, but you guys are kinda touchy-feely right now. And, y'know, all the time."

Izuku levels a glare at him. "The girls are 'touchy-feely' with each other all the time, and I've never seen anyone accuse *them* of dating."

Ashido snickers. "He's got you there, Sero."

"Right, whatever, point taken," Kaminari cuts in, before the conversation can derail entirely. "Anyway—" He turns back to Izuku and clasps his hands together. "We wanted to ask you a favor. Could we borrow your cat? And if not, what could we pay you to borrow your cat?"

"Depends on what you're borrowing her for," Izuku answers. "If it's for emotional support, that's free. For anything else, it's negotiable in litterbox duty."

Sero pulls a face, but Ashido and Kaminari brighten. "I'm good with that!" Kaminari says, nodding vigorously. "But seriously, we just need to borrow her for some, uh… experiments." At Izuku's frown, he waves his hands. "It's nothing bad! We just need to check out some things…"

Bakugou, passing by to head toward the kitchen, makes an irritated noise in the back of his throat.

“Oh, come on, Bakugou, you’re just stubborn!” Ashido calls after him, and gets a middle finger in response.

“I’m with Bakugou on this, it’s dumb,” Jirou deadpans from the other couch.

“It’s not dumb!” Kaminari retorts. “If you’d just pay attention to the evidence, you’d know—”

“There is no evidence!” Jirou almost yells, clearly exasperated to the end of her patience. “I’m telling you, all this quirk training is messing with your brain!”

“You’re a skeptic, Jirou!” Ashido shoots back, and Izuku starts to notice the dull squeezing pain of a tension headache.

“Hey guys, can we play a game?” he asks. “It’s a fun game. It’s called the *Let’s pretend Izuku doesn’t know what we’re talking about* Game. Because I’m lost.”

“The dorms are haunted,” Ashido answers promptly.

“Pretty much.” Kaminari’s hands go from clasped to almost twisted together. “We were hoping to borrow your cat so we could, like, take her around to all the problem areas, you know? See if she reacts to anything.”

Izuku stares at him, blinking slowly. On the other couch he sees Uraraka and Iida sitting across from Jirou. Uraraka fidgets and avoids looking at anyone. Iida becomes thoroughly absorbed in his English textbook. Tensei looks bewildered. Rei looks far too pleased with herself. Somewhere out of his range of vision, he can hear Hino stifling a snicker.

“So—” He starts, then second-guesses himself. “You guys want to use my cat as a *ghost detector*.”

Sero groans. “I knew he wouldn’t believe us. I told you.”

“*Ghosts aren’t real, you dumb fucks!*” Bakugou bellows from the kitchen.

Izuku feels Todoroki tense, and sighs heavily. “You know what? Fine.

Go ahead. She'll have fun."

Kaminari brightens. "Awesome! Where is she?"

"I dunno, somewhere." Izuku shuts his eyes. "Go find her. Don't grab her too hard. She's really easygoing about everything, so if she scratches you then it's your fault."

The boys look like they're about to complain, but Ashido hooks arms with both of them and drags them off, shouting a cheery "Thanks, Midoriya!" over her shoulder.

Jirou blows a raspberry. "*Haunted*. These dorms were built, like *yesterday*. All this training must be scrambling their brains."

"It's silly, but it's not completely out of nowhere," Yaoyorozu remarks. "It gets drafty from time to time in odd places, and the building is new enough that I hear it settling from very now and then."

"It is the end of summer," Iida offers, ever helpful. "The weather is beginning to change. Buildings often make noise in response to temperature changes."

"Cool," Jirou remarks. "Hey Todoroki, quit messing with the building, you'll give Kaminari nightmares."

"Okay," Todoroki answers, turning a page.

Things quiet after that, and Izuku slips into a light doze. He isn't quite asleep, still distantly aware of things happening around him, but he isn't nearly awake enough to hold any of it in his mind before it slips out again. People chat quietly around him, but he only registers the noise, not the meaning. Eventually, a light shake to his shoulder rouses him.

"Almost everyone's gone to bed," Todoroki informs him. "It's probably more comfortable upstairs."

Izuku's jaw cracks as he yawns. "Don't sell yourself short," he says, and dawdles on moving until his friend stands up and nearly dumps him off the couch entirely.

"Sorry," Todoroki says, but there's a bit of humor hovering in his face as Izuku scrambles to salvage some level of balance and dignity. "My legs were falling asleep."

A high-pitched laugh tells him Uraraka is still here. Izuku looks over to find that she and Iida are the only other students who haven't left yet. Warmth rises within him unbidden—it's nice to wake up surrounded by friends.

"Er, Midoriya," Iida speaks up. Izuku glances over, and for once he doesn't feel self-conscious about shooting a grin at Tensei over his friend's shoulder. "I… have an awkward question." His eyes flicker to the side, toward Todoroki. "It can wait, though."

Izuku blinks, confused, then almost smacks himself in the forehead. He's been so euphoric and giddy about telling people that he's forgotten to keep them in the loop about who knows. "It's fine, Iida," he says. "Everyone in the room knows."

"Oh!" Iida's eyebrows shoot upward, and he turns to stare at Todoroki more openly.

"He told me last night," Todoroki explains. "You haven't missed much."

"We sort of found out by accident, when we went to visit Deku's mom," Uraraka says. "It was actually, um… remember how, when we got back, we sort of bullied the rest of you into going to Kamino instead of the new location Momo found out about?"

"I wouldn't call it bullying," Iida says hesitantly.

"It was ghosts," Uraraka says. "Ghosts told us. Wrote it all out on a dusty mirror."

"Oh," Todoroki says, in the tone of voice of someone who is re-processing a great deal of things previously thought to be facts. "And —wait, at Kamino, when we were searching for Midoriya, and you ran off—"

"Ghosts again," she says. "Maybe the same ghost? She kept vanishing, and I was ahead of you, so you didn't see her."

Todoroki looks back to Izuku now. "I thought only you could see them?"

"That's… a new development," Izuku says. "I'm sort of working on it."

"And speaking of developments, it doesn't quite account for your strength," Iida adds, and Izuku shuts his eyes. "I'm aware that quirks can combine in odd ways—Todoroki is proof of that. But at least his

opposing sides both deal in temperature and elements. How does your strength relate to, well… seeing the dead?"

"That… is… an excellent question," Izuku says slowly. He tries not to look at Todoroki. He remembers his friend's first guess at his connection to All-Might, and he has no idea what he must think now. "Um. There is a clear and coherent answer to it, I promise, but… I can't really say?" He sighs. "I'm sorry, guys, but it's not just my secret, so I can't answer that. I promise it's nothing bad, but that's not something I can really, um, talk about. I know it doesn't make sense, but—"

"It's fine," Todoroki says bluntly. "It's not like we're going to force you to talk."

"If it's nothing bad, then I don't see the harm," Iida says, a bit reluctantly. Uraraka gives him a thumbs-up, and Izuku sighs with relief.

"Thanks. Oh, sorry, Iida, was there something else you wanted to ask?"

To his surprise, Iida's face turns a little pink. "Right! Well, er. Considering the earlier conversation… I mean, it's a far more valid question than Jirou and the others seem to think, but… *are* the dormitories haunted?"

The question catches Izuku on an exhale, so his bark of laughter comes out as an almost squeaky wheeze. Izuku looks to a grinning Tensei, then a thoroughly amused Rei, and purses his lips to keep from laughing again.

"Define 'haunted'," he says.

"How many ghosts are there right now?" Uraraka asks.

"Two," he says, with a cautious glance at Iida. They've had their conversation, but he's not sure how willing Iida is to be open about it.

His friend's face softens into a smile; it turns out he has nothing to worry about. "One of them's Tensei, isn't it?" Uraraka gasps sharply, and Todoroki's weight shifts with tension.

"Yeah. And one of them's Rei—she's a friend of mine. Sometimes there's a third one, but…" His voice trails off as he looks around, but Hino is nowhere in sight.

“Is he a friend of yours, too?” Uraraka asks, still shooting odd glances at Iida.

“No, actually, he’s kind of a dick,” Izuku answers. Tensei snorts loudly, and Rei laughs so hard the light flickers. “I first met him at the Sports Festival, knocking drinks out of Endeavor’s hands.” It’s Todoroki’s turn to stifle a laugh, this time.

They do head back to their rooms, soon after. Izuku’s path takes him close by the laundry room, and he hears voices from within. There’s a sharp thud, like a door slamming shut, followed by three startled yelps. Rei darts inside, looking more excited than alarmed, and Izuku peeks in out of curiosity.

Ashido, Kaminari, and Sero are huddled together—or rather, Ashido and Kaminari are huddled behind Sero. The latter holds Mika out in front of him Lion-King Style, as if his unruffled one-eyed cat is supposed to shield them all. Before them, the door of one of the cupboards above the washing machines is swinging on its hinges, banging each time it swings shut.

Hino’s sitting on the washing machine beneath it, looking bored as he does the swinging.

Ashido catches sight of him first. “You see this, right?” she splutters, and that’s the moment Hino stops playing with the cupboard door. When Ashido sees it stop moving, just in time for a witness’s arrival, she almost screams in frustration.

Hino takes one look at Izuku’s face and shrugs, thoroughly unapologetic. “What? I’m giving the kids what they want.”

It’s too late for this. Izuku is tired enough that he’s going to sleep perfectly well alone in the dark of his own room. “We have training tomorrow,” he tells his classmates. “Ghosts will still be here in the morning.” He turns on his heel, ignoring Kaminari’s shout of “That’s the *problem!*” as he heads for the stairs.

He almost wakes up a little later when his bedroom door opens a crack. But it closes a moment later, leaving him with soft footsteps, a quietly jingling collar, and a warm, vibrating weight against his side for the rest of the night.

His alarm wakes him the next morning, and Izuku blinks awake with a feeling of vague satisfaction at having slept through the night.

Fumbling, he turns off the alarm, sits up, and nearly falls out of bed.

“Sorry,” Nana says, though she doesn’t put as much inflection behind it as she could. “I didn’t mean to spook you, but… we need to talk.”

The dregs of sleep vanish, and Izuku slips out of bed, fully alert. Nana has a history of clamming up about things she honestly shouldn’t, so hearing those four words out of her mouth means it’s something huge, or she’s finally living up to her vow to do better. In Izuku’s experience, ghosts don’t change easily—death tends to stagnate a lot of things.

With his eyes still clearing, he tries to search her face for some clue about what’s troubling her. She was quiet yesterday when he talked to All-Might. Did it have something to do with that?

He shakes his head. There’s no point in guessing when she’s about to speak anyway. “What’s going on? Is All-Might okay?” He keeps his voice low. Todoroki won’t think much of him talking to thin air, now that he knows, but he can’t say the same for the others on their floor.

“No,” she answers, and Izuku’s heart leaps to his throat. “I mean—it’s nothing immediate. But—” She sighs harshly. “You’ve seen him, sprout. He’s not doing well. And… honestly I don’t know know if you, by yourself, can fix it. But you deserve to know what started this at least.” She faces him, the worry stark on her face. “That’s assuming you don’t already know. Did One For All tell you about—about Shigaraki?”

“Um…” Izuku frowns, wracking his brain. “No. Aside from where he was and what he was doing, if I needed to know.”

“Right,” Nana murmurs. “Okay.” She speaks half to herself, as if bracing for what she’s about to say. “He found me, when you sent him out looking for Rei. The first holder of One For All—I only met him once, right after my death. I went to find Toshi, he stayed with his brother, and that was the last I saw of him until he came to lead Rei to you. He told me—well, he thought I already knew, and I don’t blame him because—damn it, I should have known. I should never have—” She stops, pressing her lips together until they turn white. “I might’ve kept it to myself for good, but then All For One told Toshi, after you escaped. He was trying everything by then, just to force him into despair like—like he did to me. I’m not sure he didn’t succeed.”

“Ms. Nana,” Izuku says gravely. “Please tell me what they said.”

“I had a family,” Nana blurts out, as if forcing the words out before

she can lose her nerve. “A husband, and a son, and—and I couldn’t protect them.”

Dread creeps over Izuku’s heart like grasping vines.

“I made enemies,” Nana continues. “Every hero does, but—my enemies found my family. They killed my husband, and I knew—it was just a matter of time before they found Teru, too, and I couldn’t raise him alone, not with my duties as a hero and a successor to train and All For One still alive, so… I gave him up.” Her voice only breaks a little. “I pulled every resource I had to find him a foster family, far away from me. I didn’t even let them tell me where, because I didn’t trust myself to lose heart and go after him. I made Toshi and Gran Torino swear to me that they would never go looking for him. I haven’t seen him since. When I died, I tried to search for him, but I didn’t even know where to start looking, so I told myself he had a life of his own and I wasn’t a part of it anymore, and I stopped looking. And—” She stops again, lets her head drop into her hands, twists her fingers into her hair. “I just found out he had a *child*, Izuku. He had a son of his own. Tenko, Shimura Tenko, my *grandson*. And All For One found him, and turned him into Shigaraki Tomura.”

Izuku feels his blood turn to ice, swift and devastating as Todoroki’s quirk. For a moment, he can’t even breathe. Mika’s twining around his ankles but he can barely feel her.

“It was my failure that started it,” Nana continues. “I should have kept tabs on him, I should have let Gran Torino or Toshi keep tabs on him, but I didn’t. It was *my* failure, *mine*, but Toshi thinks it’s his, and I can’t stand by and watch that fester inside of him anymore.”

“Has he—has he talked to Gran Torino?” Izuku rasps. He’s sitting on his bed again, his legs all but giving out beneath him.

“Some,” Nana says. “Not as much as he should. Just to pass the news, but nothing beyond surface level.” She sits down beside him, just tangible enough for the bed to dip. “Gran’s helping spearhead the hunt for the rest of All For One’s operation. He won’t let Toshi help, and Toshi wants to help so badly it’s eating him up inside. He won’t talk to Gran about it because neither of them know how to talk about things like that. He won’t talk to any of his colleagues, either because he can’t without revealing the secret of One For All, or he thinks they’re too busy and he’ll be a burden.”

“So no one knows what’s wrong but you,” Izuku murmurs. “And I’m

the only one you can ask for help."

"It doesn't have to be you," she says softly. "You could ask for help yourself. You could pass it along to someone—Gran, or Recovery Girl. Maybe even that detective, Tsukauchi, he always knows what to say to calm Toshi down."

"No," Izuku says. "I mean—maybe. If I'm not enough, then I will." He stops, then tries again. "I mean, if *we're* not enough. Then I will."

Nana goes quiet. "We," she says softly. "Then, you mean—"

"It's time," Izuku tells her. "I should've told him long ago, Ms. Nana. You know that."

"Yes," She says, closing her eyes.

"I'm gonna need you in my corner," Izuku says. "You know that, right? No vanishing, no clamming up."

Her hand is cold as it squeezes his shoulder. "You can count on me," she says, and there's a steadiness in her face that tells him she means it.

[From: Young Midoriya]

[7:49 AM]

I need to talk to you today, after training. Somewhere private? It's important and I don't want anyone to overhear.

Toshinori has seen this room many times before. It's a small meeting-and-rec room in UA's halls, soundproofed to the outside, devoid of any recording devices, for private discussions that must not be overheard. It's been the perfect place to discuss One For All and all it entails, and now, in a bit of a twist on their normal arrangement, it's young Izuku who has invited him to talk.

His fault, of course, Toshinori thinks with no small amount of guilt. There have been so many things on his mind lately—or just one thing that takes up all the space available. He's doing his best not to neglect his students, not to neglect his *successor*, but so much has changed, and it's left him floundering to keep his head above water.

It's evening now. Izuku is done with training, freshly showered and

dressed comfortably in street clothes. Toshinori has lost a bit of bandaging every time he's seen his young student—at this point, the cast on his arm is all that's left. At some point Ashido convinced him to let her sign it; even from across the room, he can see Izuku eyeing the bright purple kanji and flowers.

He focuses on that for a few seconds. It's a nice bit of silliness to seep through the guilt and regret and frustration that fester within him.

Toshinori is sitting down, two cups of tea laid out on the table in front of him, like always. For a moment he thinks Izuku is going to stay on his feet, but eventually the boy sits next to him. He takes the cup of tea that Toshinori slides toward him, and drinks from it without speaking.

The silence gets to Toshinori embarrassingly quickly. "I've worried you," he says, shamefaced. "Haven't I?"

"It's not your fault," Izuku tells him solemnly. "It's All For One's. He knew exactly what he was doing, when he said what he did. He wanted to hurt you as much as he could, before he went down."

It's a brutally sensible thing to say. "That doesn't mean it wasn't true," Toshinori says quietly.

"It means it doesn't matter if it was true," Izuku says. "When—when I was with him, he talked to me a few times. At least once a day, sometimes twice. I hated it, because I always left feeling like I forgot which way was up, and I'd have to remind myself all over again. But what helped was—" He hesitates, as if his momentum has carried him farther forward than he intended. "What helped was knowing that he was doing it all on purpose. He started off by lying to me and then promising to tell me the truth, and it didn't matter if he was lying or not because everything he said and everything he did was to get me to do what he wanted me to do and think what he wanted me to think, and when I kept that in my head, I could shut out the rest."

When did his successor get so wise? "I…" Toshinori glances briefly at him, then turns back with a sigh. "I think I see your point, my boy," he says. "And I'm grateful. But you don't know what he said to me, after you left."

The silence that follows is enough to make him nervous.

"I do, actually," Izuku says. Toshinori stifles a cough, tasting blood in the back of his throat. "And before you ask… no, it's not because he

told me too. He didn't breathe a word of it to me. He probably didn't think it'd matter to me. Maybe he thought I didn't know about her at all."

Toshinori swallows blood and bile, and composes himself with a deep and shaky breath. "Nana," he murmurs. "Gran Torino told you about her, didn't he."

"He told me because I asked him," Izuku says. "But that's not why I know her."

And that's—odd. The way he worded that is odd, saying *I know her* in the present tense, as if he's met her before. But that's impossible, because he's only just turned sixteen, and she died decades ago. Toshinori shakes his head. "This isn't an easy thing to talk about, my boy," he says.

"Important things never are." There's an almost world-weary note to it, and that doesn't belong in a teenager's voice. "Sometimes not being ready for something just isn't a good excuse anymore, and… I think we both forget that a lot. Like—right now, with you, sort of."

Toshinori looks at him, confused.

"You've been avoiding this, because it hurts." Izuku won't look at him. His hands curl into fists in his lap, and his eyes are fixed on the tea in front of him. "Because you're ashamed, and you're afraid of what people will think of you. Maybe you blame yourself and you think everyone else is going to blame you too, so you don't talk about it even when you need to. Even if it might help if they knew." He grits his teeth. "She does that too, all the time, and I *told* you not to copy her."

Toshinori goes dead still. This doesn't make any sense. His student has always been an odd one, but this is the first time he's ever said something that made no sense at all. "Midoriya—"

"But I can't really hold that against you," Izuku says, and his knuckles are white against his knees. "Because I do it too. I hide things, and I lie, because it's easier that way even if it's not right anymore. Like with you. I've been lying to you, but I have to stop now, because I can't tell you what you need to hear unless you know the truth first."

"The truth about *what*? Midoriya—"

"What happened to Shimura Tenko wasn't your fault," Izuku says, and

Toshinori forgets the word he was about to say next.

“You—you don’t know that,” he says. He can’t possibly know, because Gran Torino never told him that Nana had a child—

“I do,” Izuku says. “What were you supposed to do? How were you supposed to find him? She hid him so well even *she* didn’t know where to start looking. She told you not to look, she told you her son would be safer far away from you where villains would never find him. You argued with Gran Torino about it, but in the end you both wanted to honor her wishes.”

This is wrong. This is all wrong. Toshinori’s hands tremble so badly that he has to put his cup down and fight to keep his voice steady. “Izuku,” he says softly, the name slipping from his wavering tongue. “You’re scaring me.”

“That’s okay,” his student whispers. “I scare me too, sometimes.”

“You shouldn’t know this,” Toshinori says. “You shouldn’t know any of this, because I know for a fact that Gran Torino wouldn’t have told you—”

“He didn’t tell me,” Izuku says. “He didn’t tell me about Nana. He didn’t tell me that All For One killed her. You did, but you weren’t the first, because—because *she* was.”

His mind goes blank. “…What did you say?”

“I know because she told me.” The words spill from his student in a rush. “Ms. Nana—she told me. She told me everything.”

“You—she—” Toshinori faces him, dumbfounded. He recovers himself, but only barely. “Young Midoriya, she—she died. It would’ve been years before you were born, when—it happened when I was younger than you.”

“I know,” Izuku says. “But she—she’s still here. She’s here, and I can see her, and I can see others like her, because—,”

“Young Midoriya,” Toshinori’s voice trembles.

“—that’s what I was lying to you about, I lied about being quirkless because no one ever believed me about the ghosts before then, but—but she’s *here*, and you deserve to know—”

"*Midoriya.*" He can feel it in every inch of himself, from his mind to his heart to every nerve ending in his body, the overwhelming urge to push back and push away. Because this—this is unheard of, it's absurd, and he can't—it's not true. It can't be. It's impossible.

His student watches him from a few feet away, eyes wide and fists trembling, and Toshinori has to look away.

"I—I owe you an apology," he says, fighting to keep his voice steady. "I've worried you, and it's—you didn't have to go *this far*, Midoriya."

"N-no, All-Might, wait—" but Toshinori shakes his head and forges on.

"I understand that you're afraid for me, after everything you've been through, but this is *cruel*," His voice cracks on the last word. "It's a cruel thing to claim. You understand why, don't you?"

"I'm not—it's the *truth*, All-Might, this is my quirk! I see ghosts, I see her, she's here right now—"

"That's *enough*, Midoriya." It's the closest he's come to raising his voice since that night—since he faced All For One for the last time. He rises to his feet, wondering how he'll make it back to the safety of his room when his balance feels so utterly shattered. "I'll think about what you've said, but you go too far—"

"*You don't get to say that to me!*"

Toshinori goes still, words of denial dying in his throat. His student is on his feet, staring up at him with tears overflowing in his bright, desperate eyes. His fists are so tight that Toshinori wonders if his nails have broken skin.

"You don't get to say that to me," Izuku almost seethes through his tears, but he doesn't look angry, just desperate and hurt and halfway to panic. "You came to me when I was *nobody*, and you told me your secrets. You told me about your scar, and your weakness, and your power and everything it meant to you. You told me all of that and I listened! I've *always* listened, and I've *always* kept your secrets, and you don't get to turn around and call me a liar when I try to tell you mine!"

Toshinori grinds his teeth. It's—it's not true, it can't be true. "Midoriya—"

"I know it's hard! I know you're not ready! I'm not either, and we're

never going to *be* ready!" Izuku's eyes well up with fresh tears that he doesn't bother drying. "But I can't keep this in anymore, and she doesn't want me to. She wants you to know, All-Might, she wants you to know she's still here and she's *always* been here—"

"She's *gone*, Midoriya!" His shout is every bit as weak and frail as the rest of him, a kitten's mewl to the roar it once was, but it still breaks through his student's words. "I accepted that years ago. She's *gone*. She's been gone a long time. I lost her, and it's *cruel* to wield her memory this way when you only know her by what you've been told —"

"You gave me her words on the beach," the boy cuts him off, and yet again the grief and anger and denial on the tip of Toshinori's tongue go no further. "When you gave me One For All. You told me it wasn't a gift or luck, it was something I earned with my effort, but those weren't your words, they were *hers*. They were the only thing she had time to give you, and you passed them to me because you remembered how much they meant to you." Izuku meets his gaze squarely, for all that his eyes still leak. "Did you know she did the same for you?"

"Midoriya—" Denial makes a strong shield, a rigid barrier between his heart and whatever pain lies beyond it. Already he feels a spiderweb of cracks.

"She says she's sorry for always teasing you about your hair," his student continues, ruthless even in his tears. "She says she did it once when you were having a bad day, because she was trying to make you smile. But you cried instead, and you were worried she'd think you wouldn't deserve her power if you cried, and she never got around to apologizing for it. She's sorry she left you and she's sorry she couldn't teach you more. She's sorry for so many things, but she's not sorry she picked you. She's never been sorry for that."

The spreading cracks turn to crumbling. He tries to fight it, he really does, but—he knows his student. He knows Midoriya Izuku, and Midoriya Izuku would not lie like this. Never like this.

"And she—" His student's voice breaks. "She says—you visit her, whenever things get bad, whenever it's so lonely that you don't know what else to do. You go to the place where they buried her, whenever you feel lost, and you ask her a question. Do you want to know what the answer is?"

Toshinori stares at him, fighting a losing battle against the burn behind his eyes.

“She says it’s ‘every day,’” Izuku tells him. “‘Every day, Toshi, every damn day of your life.’”

It’s Izuku’s voice, but he can hear the words in hers, as clear as if she were standing in the room next to him. Toshinori can’t see his student anymore. Everything is a watery haze. One hand pressed against his mouth isn’t nearly enough to keep back the flood.

“She won’t tell me what your question is,” Izuku tells him. “You don’t have to, if you don’t want to.”

“It was—” Toshinori chokes on the words, on the memory, on the blood in his throat. “I-I asked if—”

He moves his hand from his mouth, but he can barely speak even then. Izuku watches him, now calm and patient through the tears.

“Do—” Toshinori can only look helplessly at his student. “Do I make her proud?”

Izuku purses his lips as if holding back a sob, but it does nothing for the flood of fresh tears. “That’s why she stayed, you know,” he says, once he can pull his crumbling voice back together. “Sh-she thinks you were the one thing she did right, a-and she can’t stand the thought of leaving without you, and—and sometimes you’re so bright she can’t look away.”

His student is in his arms before Toshinori even realizes he’s moved. Izuku gasps in shock as Toshinori pulls him into a tight hug, but it’s only a moment before the boy’s arms are around him.

“I’m sorry,” Toshinori says hoarsely. “I’m sorry, my boy, I’m so sorry.” If he could take back his harsh words, pluck them out of the air and swallow them back down, he would.

“She—we don’t want you blaming yourself for everything,” Izuku says, his voice muffled against Toshinori’s bony shoulder. “We don’t want you thinking everything you did was worthless, because it *wasn’t*, it’ll never be worthless. It meant everything, and you’ve done so much, and if I end up half the hero you are then it’ll be worth it.”

Toshinori manages a watery chuckle. He can barely speak, barely think—it’s as if the world has opened into something so much bigger

and stranger than he ever realized. But there's still one constant. One thing he's sure of.

"My boy," he whispers through tears. "You're going to be ten times the hero I ever was."

Chapter End Notes

CW: Discussion of past trauma and emotional manipulation.

Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

More art my dudes!

coffee-and-ramen

bimbambapboo(2)

hauntedustghost (2)

bananaink (2)

kingogemz

jelli-n-ace

artsy-oleander

royallyscrewed-up

thegreatmeddler

As always, this story has a TV Tropes page!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Inko wonders if this is going to be a regular event: having the retired Symbol of Peace in her kitchen for tea.

She ought to have expected it sooner, given his arrangement with her son, but she's gone from months without so much as a whisper from him, to a few scattered but important conversations. Now here he is again, standing awkwardly in her home in clothes that, for once, aren't too big for his new form—or his true form, rather. Inko wonders how open he's going to be about the fact that he's apparently been looking like this for the past six years.

They sit down, and Inko pushes a cup of tea toward him. "Is Izuku doing all right?" she asks. Izuku calls regularly and insists that he is, but it never hurts to get a second opinion.

"Very well," All-Might assures her. "He's, ah—the class is away today. They'll be taking the provisional license exams. It's why I had the time to arrange this meeting with you."

“I see.” Inko can’t help the little stutter in her heartbeat, secondhand nervousness at this news of her son’s big day.

“He—er. We’ve…” All-Might stumbles through a few false starts. “We… had a conversation, the two of us. A very enlightening conversation. I believe that, for once, we both have all our cards on the table.”

Inko nods. Izuku called her the night before, tearfully breathless in his relief, just to tell her the news. “He told you,” she says in a hushed voice. “About his quirk.”

All-Might nods.

“And?”

“I…” His eyes slide downward, as if ashamed of himself. “It was a lot. I’m afraid that I didn’t handle it very well, at first. But luckily for both of us, young Izuku is persistent. I nearly—I was in denial at first. When he told me of his original quirk, he also told me about—about someone that I lost.” He stops again and seems to correct himself. “Someone that I thought I lost.”

“He mentioned that you had a ghost of your own,” she says softly, hoping that she isn’t overstepping.

“My old mentor. My predecessor, in fact. I thought that I had come to terms with her death years ago. It’s strange to think that she is still here. That she has always been here.”

“It’s a strange quirk,” Inko says sympathetically. “You learn to live with things like that after a while, but it’ll always be just a little strange.” She turns her head to eye the electric air freshener filling the room with the scent of spring orchids, and the next room where there’s soft music playing even though she isn’t in there listening. Morino likes the smell and Kurosawa likes the music. The mirror leans against the wall with the container of baby powder, just in case anyone feels like having a conversation.

“And on that note, I have a question,” All-Might says hesitantly. “About something you told me earlier.” Nervously he taps his index finger against the cup. “When I met with you, you told me that dying would be the cruelest way to hurt him. And now that I know about his ability, I’m… confused. His power being what it is… wouldn’t he be able to see me, in that case?”

Inko shuts her eyes, sighs, and wishes for patience with short-sighted, self-sacrificial fools. “Yes. He would. He would see you, and be reminded each time of what he’s lost—because he will have lost you, in a way. Just because he sees the dead doesn’t mean he can’t feel loss, All-Might. It doesn’t mean death doesn’t cause him pain.” She puts her cup down. “When he first told me about you, the day you offered your power to him, I was… hesitant. I could see so many ways that it could all go wrong, and I wanted him to be sure that he was making the right choice for himself. Do you want to know what he told me?”

The former hero nods wordlessly.

“He told me that he wanted, more than anything, the chance to save lives, and that your offer was the only chance he was ever going to get. He told me that he couldn’t save lives with the quirk he already had—all he could do was talk to them when they were already dead.”

She hears All-Might’s breath hitch at that and thinks, *good.* It means her words are reaching him.

“My son has a strange relationship with death, All-Might,” she continues. “I will never share that. Maybe no one will. But don’t ever, ever think that it means nothing to him at all. Don’t make that mistake—for his sake and for yours.”

All-Might nods, but she can see the familiar helplessness on his face, of a man faced with something he cannot understand but desperately wants to.

“It’s going to be all right,” she tells him. “It’s strange now, but you’ll learn. Izuku will explain things if you ask. It’s not often that he gets to speak freely about it with someone who isn’t me.”

“I don’t even know where to start,” All-Might admits.

Her eyes soften as she looks at him. “Start with Rei,” she advises. “Always start with her. He’ll start talking and never want to stop.”

Izuku doesn’t fall asleep on the way to the testing location. It’s a close thing, but it helps that late summer days are hot enough to warrant air conditioning in the buses, turned up so high that his teeth chatter when he sits beneath the vent. When the bus finally comes to a halt outside their destination, it’s a relief to step back out into the warm sun, for all of five seconds before he starts sweating again.

“You look like someone just insulted your mother,” Todoroki says dryly.

Without answering, Izuku steps around to his right side and sighs with relief. Todoroki’s quirk is like its own air conditioner even when it’s not activated, and the oppressive heat keeps it from being excessively chilly like the air inside the bus.

“That bad?” Todoroki sounds mildly amused.

“It’s like an oven out here,” Izuku mutters, letting his head fall to Todoroki’s shoulder. The fabric of his school uniform is pleasantly cool.

“Don’t fall asleep,” Todoroki advises. Aizawa-sensei is saying something, addressing the class, and Izuku tunes in just enough to register that it’s the normal gruff pep talk and general advice. “There are students from other schools here, too. If you want to make an impression and yell ‘Plus Ultra’ with everyone, you might want to stand up straight.”

Reluctantly, Izuku raises head, but he stays close enough to Todoroki to take advantage of his right side. He cocks an eyebrow at his friend, trying not to smirk too hard. “Since when do *you* care about making a good first impression?”

Todoroki blinks, and for a split second he looks almost defensive. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, the first time you talked to *me* was when you walked up to me and offered me an ass-kicking, but—”

Todoroki makes a show of trying to shove him, but he doesn’t try very hard. “Enough.” A smile is trying to take over, judging by the way his mouth twitches. “Besides—I just said an impression. I never said anything about making it a good one.”

To be fair, they have drawn a lot of attention from the other examinees. Izuku’s too distracted to notice them at first, but that quickly changes because the Shiketsu crowd is *loud*.

Well—one of them is, at least. The rest of the class is pumping themselves up with a “Plus Ultra” call, and one of the Shiketsu boys joins in loud enough to drown them out by himself.

“Sorry!” he yells, without lowering his volume at all. “I heard what

you guys were doing, and I got excited! I always kinda wanted to do that! It's a cool chant, you know? Really gets you pumped up!" For a moment he glances in Izuku's general direction, and his eyes narrow, but it's over in a split second. Confused, Izuku glances around to see if someone else caught the boy's eye, but the only other person close by is Todoroki—and Hino, but of course he wouldn't have been looking at him.

It's only in looking around that Izuku notes the size of the crowd they've drawn. It's not just Shiketsu, but several schools. Some of them move in close to gawk, and Izuku finds himself shifting closer to Todoroki with vague discomfort at the unwelcome proximity. Others are standing back to watch from a distance, and the crowd is just thick enough to make it hard to see them all. Bakugou almost gets in a scuffle with someone from Ketsubutsu Academy before Kirishima calms him down.

Eventually, a rattling hiss tells him that Rei's had quite enough of this. He's close enough to feel Todoroki shifting uncomfortably when she makes her displeasure known to everyone within range of the change in atmosphere. It takes a few moments, but people start to disperse.

"It's like the Sports Festival, but worse," Izuku mutters.

"Makes sense," Todoroki says calmly. "There's a limit to how many can pass. Not everyone can make it, and not everyone at this location is a first year." He pauses. "What's more, thanks to the Sports Festival, everyone here will know what our quirks are. We can't say the same for any of them."

"Okay, cool," Izuku says. "I'm gonna go vomit."

One of the lingering Shiketsu kids hears him—a pretty second-year girl with a school uniform cap perched on her head at a jaunty angle. She catches his eye and grins in a not-unfriendly way. "Bruh," she says. "That's like, the eternal mood."

Izuku waits until the Shiketsu students have returned to their own classmates before he speaks up. They various classes are moving into the testing facility now, and Class 1-A moves with them. "Hey, did you know that guy?"

"Which one?" Todoroki asks.

"The one from Shiketsu. Tall, buzzed haircut, kinda loud? I could've sworn he was looking at you funny."

“I… wasn’t paying attention,” Todoroki admits.

“You would have met him before.” Aizawa-sensei says, falling in step beside them. “I’m surprised you’d forget him. That was Yoarashi Inasa—he was a recommended student at U.A.”

Todoroki pauses mid-step, then keeps walking. “I thought he seemed familiar.”

“He ought to have been. He had the highest score in the demonstrations—it was a bit of a surprise when he ended up enrolling at a different school.”

“The highest score?” Izuku echoes, glancing toward Todoroki again. “As in, higher than yours?”

“Higher than mine at half my power,” Todoroki says.

Izuku nods. “Good point.” It’s kind of comforting to hear that, actually. Todoroki’s far and away above where he was back then, and even during the Sports Festival. So is Izuku. So is everyone in their class. The other schools might have seen their quirks on display back then, but even now the Sports Festival feels like it happened a lifetime ago.

Izuku glances around, eyeing the ghosts in his line of vision. Rei’s here, Hino’s following Todoroki, Tensei wouldn’t miss this for the world, and even Narita is flanking Aizawa-sensei. He didn’t have them, back at the Sports Festival. The ones he did, he didn’t use.

Things are different now. He’s learned a few tricks since then.

“Hoo boy,” Kirishima remarks later, as they get changed into their gear. “Haven’t seen that smile in way too long, Midoriya.”

The first test is instant pandemonium. In spite of Izuku’s best efforts to keep the class together, Bakugou and Todoroki are off and running on their own before it even starts, and Izuku has no time to try to convince at least Todoroki to come back before every single other school is charging them en masse.

For a little while it works. It’s not the first time they’ve fought together, and they can hold together as a unit even against the onslaught. But then the very ground beneath their feet heaves and shakes, scattering them from their hasty formation.

When the shaking finally stops, the ground is ripped to shreds and Izuku finds himself alone—relatively. There are other students around, but everyone is scattered. The closest person he found before this point was Uraraka, and he can't see her anywhere now. He can't see any of his classmates within reach; only Rei hasn't lost track of him.

And that's a problem, because they're surrounded by Ketsubutsu students, and it's obvious that their teamwork is solid.

"Think this would've happened if UA didn't pit us against each other all the goddamn time?" Izuku mutters to Rei. She blows a raspberry. "Yeah, I think so too. Stay close, but keep an eye out for the others, all right?"

Rei nods, and her form flickers in and out of view as she flits about, but she stays close. Almost immediately she calls to him and points: there's Iida and Aoyama, dodging balls from a group of Ketsubutsu kids. Izuku is about to go help when a familiar figure appears in his peripherals.

There's Uraraka; she must have been thrown clear of the mob, but she's alone now, and if she's alone then she's vulnerable. Iida and Aoyama have each other watching their backs for now, so Izuku hurries to join her.

"Uraraka!" he calls as loudly as he dares, not wanting to draw too much attention to her. This is good; he's worked with Uraraka loads of times, and their quirks mesh together well. If they team up, they can take out two people each, easy.

She turns to him and waves him over. Izuku picks up his pace, only to slam to a halt when Rei shoves him back with a warning shriek. He blinks, and there's a ball sailing at him, skimming past him from Uraraka's direction. If Rei hadn't stopped him, it would have hit him for sure.

"Uraraka, what—" Izuku splutters, shocked. She wants to be a hero same as the rest of them, but he didn't think she'd pick a fight with him when they have other schools to worry about.

Rei scoops up a piece of rubble and tosses it at her. The concrete chunk phases through Uraraka as if she's a mirage.

An illusion. "Find them, Rei," he murmurs. He has a ball in hand, ready to throw. "Yell. Make sure I don't lose them."

Rei vanishes, and reappears somewhere behind the illusory Uraraka, screaming loudly enough for him to hear. Another ball comes at him; this one he catches and throws back. He's rewarded by a soft thud and a high-pitched grunt, and the vision of Uraraka blurs and dissipates.

It's the girl from before, the pretty Shiketsu student who grinned at him in the parking lot. She's in her hero costume now, looking sheepishly at the ball stuck to her torso. That's one—two more and she'll out, and Izuku will have one target left.

"Okay," she says. "Gotta admit—that was pretty lit."

And then she's gone again, out of his line of vision, using the rubble for cover. Izuku sees her form pop into view a few times, darting between hiding places, but he ignores them—Rei's not with them, so they're not the real thing.

She gets smart after a while, as they pursue each other. Even with Rei giving her away, she's fast and clever enough to keep him guessing. He has a ball in his hand, ready to launch it, when he sees her zip out of hiding. He sees Rei on her, in his head he knows that's real, but his muscles second-guess him and hesitate all the same. He's on edge the next time she appears, and it makes him careless. He forgets to look for Rei, overcompensates to try and hit her. The ball sails toward her, and through her—another illusion.

Rei's rattly voice rings out in warning, followed by a triumphant cry from the Shiketsu student.

"*Yeet!*"

A ball strikes him in the chest, locking in place on contact. The impact stings, but not as much as the frustration. Two more hits and his chance is gone.

Rei saves him from another; she shrieks a warning when the girl gets behind him, and he spins and raises an arm instinctively. The ball is a split second away from hitting him when he catches it and launches it back. It catches her in a spot on her stomach, and the shocked retching noise she makes is almost comical.

"Dude! What the f—"

His chance is there, and Izuku throws caution to the wind and takes it. He hurls the ball, but in his haste his balance is off, the move is obvious, and the girl has plenty of time to dodge. She almost spins out

of the way with a warbly cry of alarm—

Rei snatches the ball out of the air and thrusts it into one of the target areas herself.

For a moment, the girl stands in the rubble, gaping down at the three balls attached to her torso. A tinny voice rings out, announcing her loss and instructing her to make her way off the field.

She looks up at him, lips pursed. Shock, disbelief, and disappointment flash across her face in an instant.

“Well fuck me, I guess,” she says. “That was some next level shit, though. Seriously wild.”

“Sorry,” Izuku says. If there were a way he could reach his goals without stepping on those of others, he would take it, but this is all that they have. It feels like making selfish decisions shouldn’t be required on the path to becoming a hero.

The other student seems to take it in stride, thankfully. “Nah, it’s cool. Good luck, my man.”

He turns away from her as she hurries to leave the chaos-ridden field. With a little luck, maybe he’ll find the real Uraraka nearby.

Shouto is the first in his class to leave the field with his place in the main exam secured. Months ago, back when his own advancement was his sole concern, this outcome would have left him either relieved or indifferent, but now he just feels restless. It’s not that he thinks his classmates aren’t capable. But the fact that his decision to strike out on his own worked out for him doesn’t mean it worked out for everyone. And Midoriya’s strategy had been a good one…

There’s no use pouting about it now. To compromise with himself, Shouto leaves the waiting area to wait by the entrance where passing students come in. He’ll feel better once he sees his classmates come in successful.

(He feels eyes on the back of his head as he leaves, and turns his head just in time to see Yoarashi Inasa glaring at him for a split second before turning away.)

Eventually, his classmates do trickle in. They arrive not all at once, but in groups. None of the people he knows come in alone, and that

bothers him a bit. When even Bakugou comes in scowling with Kaminari and Kirishima flanking him, Shouto starts to wonder if he didn't miscalculate on this after all.

To his relief, Midoriya arrives not long after, though the darkening bruise on his cheekbone is a little alarming. He's chatting with Uraraka and Sero, and looks up to wave at Shouto as they come in.

"Oh hey, you made it!" Midoriya says brightly. "I was a little worried about you, all by yourself."

Shouto shrugs as he falls in step with him. He hasn't seen everyone from Class 1-A yet, but enough of them to ease his own worries. "It wasn't too bad. Why am I not surprised that you managed to get injured?"

Uraraka snorts and elbows him lightly. "Would it surprise you that he managed to get injured *after* we were done?"

"Of course you did," Shouto says in a long-suffering voice. A cluster of other passing students pass them on the left, and he hooks his arm around Midoriya's to draw him out of their way.

"To be fair, I'm about seventy percent sure it was an accident," Midoriya says. "*And* they apologized."

"I wouldn't be that sure," Sero says. To Todoroki he explains, "The guy he tagged out decked him on the way down."

"On the way down?"

"The three of us teamed up to take the last four we needed to pass," Uraraka explains. "Deku got them into our trap, and me and Sero sprung it."

"The suspense is killing me," Shouto says.

Midoriya nudges closer like he's sharing a joke. "Two words," he says, with a touch of sheepish satisfaction. "People balloons."

Shouto stifles a laugh, and it comes out as a snort instead. Not the most dignified noise, but it's quiet enough not to draw too much attention. Midoriya looks a little too pleased with himself.

Once they reach the waiting room, Midoriya spots Kirishima and breaks off to go and congratulate him. Todoroki almost goes to join

him, but he feels the hulking Shiketsu student eyeing him sullenly from another part of the room.

“I’m gonna go see who else is coming in,” he says to Uraraka.

“Actually, that’s a good idea,” she says. “Mind if I come with you? It looks like Tsuyu-chan isn’t here yet.”

He nods, and they make their way back down the hall.

“Wonder what that one guy’s problem is with you,” she remarks.

“Hm?”

“That kid from Shiketsu. Yoarashi, I think? Did you go up against him in the first test?”

“I never saw him,” Shouto answers. Something tugs at the back of his mind, something important but uncomfortable, and he tries to turn the thought away. He’s only just gotten himself to stop feeling dissatisfied.

Uraraka shrugs and changes the subject, which he’s grateful for. “So… not to get ahead of ourselves or anything, but… what do you think comes after this?”

“Hm?”

“When—if we—I mean, for people with provisional licenses?” Uraraka threads her fingers together. “What happens after you get it? I mean, it’s not a real license, more like a learner’s permit, so… will it change how we train, or what?”

“Oh, we’ll be able to take on internships,” Shouto answers.

“Didn’t we do that after the Sports Festival?”

“Not exactly,” Shouto says. “We weren’t official interns, we were just shadowing heroes in the field. As interns with provisional licenses, we’d be given actual duties and responsibilities. The work experience week after the festival was education solely for our benefit. For interns, the expectation is that they offer something to the agencies that take them on, in return for gaining experience in the field.”

“Like being a temporary sidekick?” Uraraka asks.

“Sort of, yeah. It’s a chance to show one’s abilities and make

connections with established heroes. A lot of new pros start out as sidekicks at agencies where they interned."

"How do you even—oh, right, your dad. Are you gonna intern with him after this? Does he even take on interns?"

"Yes." A look of distaste crosses Shouto's face. "He likes the free manpower. And it's a bit early to assume success, don't you think?"

"Right, sorry. Didn't mean to jinx you. It's just hard to imagine you not passing, you know? Same with Deku." Her eyes light up. "You guys should try and intern together."

It's a nice thought, he'll admit. "Just because we're friends doesn't mean we have to. Internships aren't meant to be fun, they're mean to be educational."

"That's true, but you guys aren't just friends—you work really well together, too," Uraraka points out. "And you spar all the time, so you know each other's fighting styles inside and out. I think it'd be nice to intern with a friend, you know? It's not just safe—if you're with someone you already work well with, then you'll look better in front of the pros, right?"

That is… an excellent point. Perhaps not everything useful has to be unpleasant. "I never thought of it that way," he admits. "It's worth thinking about. I'll talk to Midoriya about it, after this. If we both pass."

"You'll pass," Uraraka tells him with a smile. "Just play to your strengths and you'll be fine."

Uraraka's a good friend. No wonder she and Midoriya get along so well.

His mood is ruined anyway when someone shoulder-checks him on the way past, almost knocking him into Uraraka. "Ex*cuse* me," Uraraka says pointedly, but the other girl simply tosses a glare over her shoulder at Shouto and keeps storming away.

He recognizes her. She'd given him trouble out on the field; the two balls stuck to his chest were from her, but in the end his ice had kept her from getting close, and he'd gotten her out himself. Apparently Midoriya isn't the only who has to deal with sore losers.

These U.A. kids aren't too bad, Inasa decides. All in all a pretty hotblooded crowd, and Inasa likes to see that in people in general, but other hero students especially. The redhead with the hardening quirk is a guy after his own heart, and his grenade friend is a little scary-looking but Inasa likes his style. Even the creepy green-haired kid is kind of cool, even if he's a little… *chilly* for Inasa's taste. He almost talked Inasa's ears clean off asking about his quirk, so maybe passions shows up in weird ways for some people.

Of course, he seemed pretty friendly with *that one*, so obviously there's no accounting for taste.

In any case, the main exam is almost starting. Most of the students that passed the first test have left the waiting room already, including most of the U.A. class. Inasa's sorry to see that Camie didn't make it; better luck next time.

He's about to go out himself when a familiar cold voice speaks from behind him. "Excuse me."

Instantly his mood drops again. Part of him wants to ignore it and move on, but that wouldn't be right. It'd be cowardly, and worst of all it would be *cold*. Inasa might not like the guy, but he's not going to stoop to his level.

So he turns around, looks down at Todoroki Shouto's frigid mismatched eyes, and restricts his scowl to a wrinkle of his nose. "Yeah?"

"Did I do something to you?" Todoroki asks. "It seems like you have a problem with me."

Inasa wants to laugh in his face. He doesn't remember—of course he doesn't remember. To be fair, it was tiny, in hindsight. Less than a minute of interaction, only a handful of words passed between them. But it meant everything to Inasa, while it means nothing to the one standing in front of him.

He knows for a fact that Endeavor wouldn't remember either.

"You probably hear this a lot," he says. "But you really take after your dad, don't you?"

Todoroki's eyes go even colder, and Inasa's gut twists with distaste.

"It's the eyes," he says. "I've seen 'em on both of you, and they're the

same.”

“My eyes—?” Todoroki’s face is different, from bland, aloof curiosity to something twisting and cold and dark. His eyes flash with anger, and he pushes past Inasa and moves on to the next testing area. He brushes past by a girl from a different school, one of the students who didn’t make it past round one. She sidesteps to keep out of his way, and shoots a positively venomous look at the back of his head.

So. He hasn’t changed much, apparently. And he’s out making more enemies, too. And no wonder, if he makes faces like that; heroes shouldn’t look like that. They’re supposed to be passionate, fiery, wholehearted in everything they do. Not cold and aloof like they think they’re better than everyone.

The girl keeps glaring at Todoroki, and that’s a comfort. At least he’s not the only one who sees it.

The main exam is almost uncomfortably familiar.

They step out into a war-torn cityscape, streets torn to shreds, buildings fallen down or in the process of falling, smoke darkening the sky. The sound of thunder fills the air, from crumbling architecture and localized explosions from ruptured gas lines and fires. The wreckage is strewn with victims, far more wounded and terrified civilians than Izuku can count. It’s Kamino Ward all over again, and Izuku has the distinct impression that this was completely intentional on the part of the proctors.

It’s all simulated, of course. There are companies and businesses devoted to constructing disaster scenarios for the purpose of training nascent heroes. Every hapless victim before them is an actor, slathered in makeup and trained to play their part and evaluate the students responding to the artificial crisis.

Izuku trades glances with his classmates, and with any ghosts he knows among them. He tries to catch Todoroki’s eye, but his friend seems focused elsewhere at the moment.

He shifts close enough to nudge him. “Hey.”

Todoroki twitches. “What.”

That’s odd. Izuku frowns, worried. “You okay?”

His friend presses his lips together and nods. “It’s nothing.”

“One of the other students was giving him shit,” Hino informs him helpfully. “That loud buzzcut kid you were talking about earlier. He’s not a fan of Endeavor which, y’know, I *get*, but…”

“If you’re having trouble with Yoarashi, then try and avoid him,” Izuku advises. “This place is big enough that you can probably stay on opposite sides of the whole place without trying too hard, you know?”

Todoroki blinks at him, shocked, before it’s replaced with comprehension. “I’ll keep that in mind,” he says. “Don’t worry about me.”

“Try not to run off on your own this time,” Izuku advises. “Something tells me that won’t fly in this round.”

There’s no time for further discussion. The exam proctor’s voice drones out over the intercom, and the exam begins.

Dozens of hero students descend upon the disaster below, and Izuku almost trips when he finds himself thrust into the middle of things. His footing and balance are fine, even on uneven terrain, but as he approaches the victims, he finds himself with a problem that he’s genuinely never encountered before.

He tries to focus on the task ahead, but a wave of embarrassment threatens to trip him up. This isn’t even real, it’s playacting and make-believe, and he feels awkward pasting a look of concern on his face when he knows that these people aren’t really injured—but he forces it down the same way he forces down fear. Luckily, swallowing embarrassment is much easier than swallowing a panic attack.

He kneels by one of the victims, a boy who looks to be younger than him. “Can you move?” he asks, keeping his voice calm.

“M-my leg.” The boy offers an incredibly convincing whimper. “I-I can’t stand—please—”

“I’ve got you, I’ve got you,” Izuku assures him, while the half-buried awkwardness makes him want to chew on his own tongue. Gingerly he maneuvers the boy into a firm, steady hold that keeps the designated wounded leg stable, and turns in the direction of the designated safe zone. Around him, the other students are falling into their roles as well, tending to other “victims.” Bakugou’s voice rings out from nearby as he chews out two who are “uninjured” enough to

stand on their feet, and Izuku tries not to roll his eyes as they break character to scold him. That's probably going to lose him some points.

It's almost comforting, knowing that Bakugou's struggling for once. He may be a strong fighter, but there's nothing to fight here, and he wouldn't know tact or bedside manner if they jumped up and bit him.

He's still worried, of course. He hopes everyone makes it. He hopes Todoroki's okay. He hopes he doesn't screw things up too badly to pass. But he's in the right headspace now, and the task is clear.

This is his next hurdle. All he has to do is get up and over.

Katsuki seethes as he frees a victim from a hefty pile of rubble, reducing the concrete trapping her leg to dust with a controlled blast. He lets Kirishima pick her up and carry her off to safety—playing nicey-nice with civilians is his thing, not Katsuki's.

Fucking hell, why did this shitty test have to be about *rescue?* He wants to fight, damn it!

He pauses, surveying the area for somewhere else he can make himself useful, and jumps when he feels someone touch the back of his neck. It's light and brief, fingertips walking up the line of his spine, and it's gone before Katsuki has the chance to swat it away.

He whirls, furious, and the only people in that direction are that loudmouthed bald kid from Shiketsu, and some girl from some other school he doesn't know. The girl is closer, hands locked behind her back.

"Hey!" he barks. "Hands to your own fucking self!"

The girl rolls her eyes at him and hurries off, and Katsuki turns back to the test in front of him.

Shouto couldn't have run off to operate on his own even if he'd wanted to.

He'd be lying if he said it wasn't jarring to have to work alongside the same people he was just in a chaotic and pitched battle with not twenty minutes ago, but it is what it is.

While Midoriya and most of his other classmates scatter to tend to victims, Shouto sets his sights on the crumbling buildings. He knows

his strengths and weaknesses, and while his quirk is powerful and his technique is polished by a decade of grueling training, he's not good with people. He's not like Midoriya; he doesn't know how to talk, how to make people feel a certain way, how to make them trust and like him. But he knows now that his right side is perfect for rescue operations just like this, for shoring up falling structures just long enough to extract the people trapped inside.

It helps that Yoarashi has a powerful wind quirk, and probably won't be anywhere near here.

He passes by Uraraka where she's clearing rubble, and she gives him a determined and encouraging smile.

He reaches the replica of a strip mall, and finds one of the Ketsubutsu students struggling to keep it standing so that others can move in to retrieve victims within. He has a hardening quirk—not hardening himself like Kirishima, but hardening other things. But Shouto can tell that it only hardens; it doesn't fuse or repair. It keeps the building from crumbling further, but it doesn't stabilize.

"Move over, I've got this," he says, and when the other boy hesitantly steps out of his way, he puts his right hand to the damaged wall and reinforces the structure with ice. With his left, he sends warm air wafting in toward the victims inside. The others, including the one with the hardening quirk, move in to retrieve the victims inside. Shouto stays put to make sure his ice doesn't crack or impede anyone.

His nervousness starts to recede. He can do this, as long as he plays to his own strengths and keeps his quirk under control. There's no need to try to stand out in this exam. There's no earning points; they start with a set number and lose points for mistakes. As long as he doesn't screw anything up, he'll be fine.

"Throwing your weight around already, aren'tcha?" Shouto jumps, then turns to glare at Yoarashi. He didn't see or hear the other boy come up, but here he is now, eyes narrowed as he glares at Shouto. "Your dad teach you to shove people around?"

Shouto fights to keep control of his quirk when it feels like his own body temperature is fluctuating violating. "My quirk was better suited for this," he says coldly, and grits his teeth to keep from saying anything more.

"Nobody else here is making excuses to show off," Yoarashi says. "Guess I'm not surprised you're a glory hound born and raised."

“Maybe you should worry more about yourself,” Shouto grits out. *Shut him out. Focus.* “Your quirk’s no good for areas with unstable standing structures. You’ll be more use clearing rubble than bothering me.” Yoarashi’s eyes spark with sudden temper, and Shouto turns away. When he glances back, he’s relieved to find Yoarashi gone.

He shakes himself, trying to clear his head. If Yoarashi wants to waste time antagonizing him instead of participating, then that’s his problem. For a split second, as he moves on to the next problem area, he considers going to find Midoriya—but no. No, he’s fine. He and Midoriya might work well together, but it’s better not to rely on him for every little thing. He can do this.

Except—

Except Yoarashi will not *go the fuck away*.

Shouto tries to shut him out. He really does. But every time he does anything—use his quirk, talk to someone, or just try to move from one problem area to the next, Yoarashi is there with a snide, casually cutting remark. What starts as an annoyance is quickly becoming a liability.

“Todoroki! Todoroki, over here!”

He almost sighs with relief when he hears Uraraka’s voice. She waves him over to a mound of rubble, beneath which he’s sure more people are buried and in need of extraction. Shouto reaches her side, raising his eyebrows in an obvious question.

“There are at least five down below,” she says. “But it’s not stable. If I lift the wrong piece, I might send the whole thing crashing in. Can you stabilize it with ice?”

“No good,” another student says. “It might take time to get them all out. Hypothermia might—”

“My left side controls heat, I’ll handle it,” Shouto cuts him off, already running ice and carefully controlled warm air through the rubble pile. He gets low, trying to reinforce it from the inside.

“What gives *you* the right to order them around?” The voice is quiet but unmistakable, setting Shouto’s teeth on edge.

He tries to focus; Uraraka’s already moving in, carefully floating the top layer of rubble away while he keeps the pile from collapsing in on

itself. “Careful,” he says tersely, if only to drown it out.

“Sounds like *someone* thinks he’s number one already just because his daddy coasted his way into the top spot—”

The timing is poor. Uraraka lays her hands on a loadbearing piece, and as it shifts upward, Shouto feels the rest of the pile shift in ways he doesn’t like. “Uraraka—” Shouto yells to stop her, which makes her jump and float it further by accident. With a frustrated growl, Shouto sends more ice to plug the hole. It works—barely—and the other students have room to reach in and pull people out.

“Be more *careful!*” he snaps, in full view of the other students and the evaluaters and the faux victims, and regrets it instantly when he sees Uraraka cringe with embarrassment and apologize.

Yoarashi shoots him a look as he carries a woman out from under the rubble, with a level of disgust that most people save for things that get stuck to the bottom of a dirty shoe. His parting shot rings in Shouto’s ears, along with an evaluator’s scolding as Shouto and Uraraka both lose points.

“I hear our new Number One treats other heroes like dirt, too. Guess you had to learn that somewhere.”

In any other situation, that might have escalated things fully. But before Shouto’s pent-up anger has the chance to boil over, an explosion rings out over the testing ground.

He recognizes the figures making their way into the field: it’s the rank-ten hero Gang Orca, at the head of what looks like dozens of armed sidekicks—or rather henchmen, in this situation. This isn’t just a disaster response and rescue simulation—they’re introducing a villain element into it, as well.

Play to your strengths.

Shouto lacks tact on the best of days, and rescue operations have never been his greatest strength, but this? Combat and battle tactics? This he can do.

“We’re good here,” Uraraka says. “Your quirk’s better for suppression anyway.”

Shouto needs no second urging.

It turns out that Gang Orca is a lot bigger up close. He lives up to his code name; his heavy-duty mutation quirk makes him look like a humanoid killer whale, black and white with wild eyes and rows of wicked-looking teeth. Visually, he's well-suited for the part he's playing; he isn't the official third most villainous-looking hero for nothing.

Every one of the faux villains is armed with a two-handed gun of some sort, and Shouto stops short as one of them takes aim and fires what looks like a mass of dense sludge. A hasty wall of ice catches most of it, though some of it flecks harmlessly on Shouto's costume and hardens. Some kind of quick-drying cement. Harmless, but good for subduing an opponent. Already they're getting shots off, taking out other examinees rushing to stop them.

Shouto spreads his ice wall, hoping to shield the other examinees from the projectiles, and sends ice rocketing toward the faux villains like a wide-ranging battering ram.

Gang Orca punches through his defense with an ease that is almost insulting. With teeth, fists, and sheer brute strength, he leaves an opening wide enough for his men to pour through and engage.

Right—he's a killer whale. Ice probably won't work on him. Shouto's left arm lights up red and orange, and he braces himself to block their advance with fire.

"Already throwing fire around? You look like Endeavor's second coming!"

It's the Sports Festival all over again. One moment Shouto has control over himself, ready to drive back the oncoming force with flame, and the next—

Old shame rises within him, like bile welling up in the back of his throat. Disgust chokes off his fire, heedless of commands from his brain and the flames peter off into a blast of hot but harmless air. A cement round narrowly misses his shoulder, driving him back as he turns to glare daggers into Yoarashi Inasa's scornful face.

There isn't time for this. The faux-villains are pushing through toward the faux-civilians, and he can't afford to lose focus like this. Does Yoarashi *want* to fail?

He sends another wall of ice up, just to buy time, just to get himself under control again. Can he even trust himself with fire, with Yoarashi

spewing poison in his ear? Can he afford to avoid using it when Gang Orca can punch through it like cheap glass?

“If you don’t like how I do things,” he grits out. “Then go somewhere else!”

Yoarashi takes down one of Orca’s men easily, relieving him of his weapon. “Damn, you’re bigheaded!” he shoots back. “What, do you think you can hold them back by yourself?”

“When you’re less than useless, yes!” Shouto snaps. Gang Orca breaks through again, forcing him to retreat, and he readies his fire again.

“Don’t act like you’re better than everyone!” Yoarashi snarls. “Not everybody can ride up the ranks on daddy’s dime!”

The fire goes wild again, and Shouto narrowly avoids taking a concrete round. *Shut him out,* he thinks, desperately, but it’s impossible to shut him out when Yoarashi won’t shut up.

“You make me so sick, I could puke! You act like you’re so *dark* and *sad* when really you can have anything you want.” Yoarashi wrinkles his nose, as if he’s smelling something awful. “It’s kind of revolting, seeing a spoiled brat like you get praised and worshipped by people who haven’t even met you!”

“Shut up!” Shouto shouts back. “Do you want to pass this stupid exam, or not!”

Yoarashi laughs in his face. “Maybe I just want to make sure you fail! Ever think of that?”

“What is *wrong* with you!”

“Your stupid arrogant face is wrong,” Yoarashi snarls. “You think you deserve everything just ‘cause mommy slept with the right guy?”

Shouto sees *red.*

For a split second he forgets about the test, about Gang Orca about his goals and desires and convictions. Just for a moment, all he wants to do is burn Yoarashi’s tongue to ash. But he holds back, somehow he holds back—because that’s not the kind of person he is nor the kind of person he wants to be.

“I said shut *up!*” he snarls back. “My family has nothing to do with

this! My *father* has nothing to do with this!"

Yoarashi's eyes spark, and his mouth curves into a smirk. "That's true! I guess he can't fix everything! Think they'll ask you to cover up that ugly scar for interviews?"

Shouto pours his anger into ice instead of fire, surrounding and encasing Gang Orca in a frozen prison. It's futile; the hero shatters it and sends ice shards flying. A jagged chunk hits Shouto in the face, gouging a deep scratch into his cheek.

"So how many toys did your daddy buy you to shut you up after he burned half your face off? You'd think a great hero like Endeavor would've been a little more thorough."

Tears sting at the corners of Shouto's eyes, blood runs down his face, and his flames run wildly out of control. As he fights to regain some semblance of control, he remembers belatedly that there are other students around, immobilized by cement rounds. One of them is well within range of his flames.

Green light blurs in his peripherals as Midoriya appears in the blink of an eye, scooping up the unlucky student and carrying him away from the fire.

Sakamata Kugo, otherwise known as Gang Orca, is utterly mystified.

This isn't the first time he's been called in to play the villain in license exams. He's seen fledgling heroes fail for a number of reasons: incompetence, inexperience, arrogance, and the like. But he's never seen anyone grind things to a halt to pick a fight with a fellow test-taker. And yet, the two otherwise promising students before him are doing exactly that.

He can't hear what's being said, between the roar of Todoroki Shouto's flames and the skirmish going on all around him. But it doesn't really matter what they're arguing about; either way their chances of passing at this point are slim to none.

The flames swirl violently out of control once more, and Gang Orca tenses when he spots the cement-splattered boy on the ground in its path. But another student is already on it, so he focuses back on the boys in front of him.

That mustn't happen again, no matter how seriously they said to take

this simulation. With a sigh, he takes out Todoroki with a few well-placed cement rounds. He tries to do the same to the other boy, but he dodges out of the way with a speed that belies his size. Once he's out of the line of fire, he grabs one of the Orca sidekicks as a shield and stays out.

There are still flames emanating from the Todoroki boy's left side, so Kugo takes a step closer, ready to subdue him further if need be. The boy needs to be taught a lesson, if he thinks he can be a proper hero with such paltry control over his own quirk—

He doesn't see the third student coming until one of his men shouts a warning, and by then it's too late. The boy slams into him from behind in a blur of green lightning, hard enough to rock him forward a bit. He stays there, clinging to his dorsal fin, and Kugo readies himself to shake him off—

A voice reaches his ear hole, just barely audible over the cacophony around them.

"Gang Orca?" The student grunts with impact as a concrete round splatters over him from behind, but he doesn't let go. "Don't react to what I'm saying. Pretend you're still trying to shake me off. This isn't about the test, and I swear I'm not lying. There's something you need to know."

The bell rings barely a minute later, signaling the end of the exam, but Kugo hears all he needs.

Shouto's mood is low.

It's with some difficulty that he scrapes the cement off his costume so that he can change back into his school uniform, but he does so with calm, almost mechanical movements. Some of his classmates talk to him, he thinks, but he hears none of them. Familiar faces pass him by, Uraraka's and Bakugou's and Kirishima's and many others, but Shouto keeps his head down and doesn't meet their eyes.

He doesn't see Midoriya anywhere, which is awful because he really, really wants Midoriya right now. Maybe he should feel embarrassed about that, but he can save that for when he's feeling less wretched.

There's some delay in presenting the scores, and still Midoriya is nowhere to be found when the screen lights up with the names of those who passed.

Shouto doesn't want to look up, but he does, and he isn't surprised that his name isn't there. It ought to be a comfort that Bakugou's isn't either, but he can't even enjoy that when he feels so hollow.

Slowly, he shifts away from his classmates. There are too many solemn looks, pitying looks, sympathetic looks—as if he deserves sympathy. Which he doesn't, not for failing this test, not after he let himself get goaded by another student and nearly injured someone by losing control of his own quirk. Midoriya would probably protest if he heard Shouto say that—

Where *is* Midoriya? Under normal circumstances Shouto might suspect him of having been injured, but Shouto saw him at the end of the test and he was fine. And now his name is on the screen, he should be here to celebrate, he should be basking in his success. If he hadn't shown up, things might have gotten even worse. He deserves this win, he should be here, so where—?

An arm settles across his shoulders, and Shouto feels relieved for all of two second before he recognizes the owner of the arm. It's not Midoriya.

"Yyyep." Yoarashi pops the 'P' and leans on Shouto's shoulders, as if they're friends, as if he didn't just spend the entire test making Shouto feel lower than dirt. Shouto's face tenses until he feels the scratch on his cheek re-open and sting. "That's about what I expected! I didn't pass either, darn."

"I wonder why," Shouto says acidly. The words burn on his tongue, white-hot with anger.

"Guess I deserve that!" Yoarashi says, with a bit too much cheer for a powerful hero student who just failed an important exam. "And I guess I owe you an apology, too! I really messed you up in there, didn't I?"

Shouto's fists clench until he's sure his nails are drawing blood. It's an apology. He should accept it graciously, however he might really feel. "We both acted poorly," he grits out.

"Can't argue with that!" Yoarashi keeps leaning on him, and Shouto wonders how many people would notice if he shoved him off entirely. "Sorry about what I said about your scar. Plenty of heroes still look cool with scars, I guess! Just make sure the cameras get your good side."

Shouto is so close to doing or saying something he'll regret later. "Yoara—"

"Hey, Todoroki!"

Relief washes over him when he hears Midoriya's voice at last. His friend is standing off to the side, straight-backed, holding a hand out to him. "Midoriya. Congratulations on passing."

Midoriya smiles brightly, teeth flashing white. "Thanks! Hey, could you come with me for a sec? Aizawa-sensei wants to talk to you about something."

Shouto's heart sinks with dread. Aizawa-sensei was watching the whole exam, of course. Of course he'll want to talk to him about that frankly embarrassing display. But the only thing worse than having to talk to his homeroom teacher right now would be staying here, letting Yoarashi fucking Inasa invade his space for a second longer.

He's about to step away when Yoarashi's arm tightens around his shoulder, pulling him into something close to a one-armed hug. "Sorry to keep him," Yoarashi says. "Hiya, Midoriya. Congratulations on passing the test."

Midoriya offers a smile and nod. "Thanks. C'mon Todoroki, Sensei looked kind of impatient."

"I'm coming." To Yoarashi he offers a cool, "Excuse me," and extricates himself from under Yoarashi's arm. He accidentally bumps the other boy's hand with his face, wincing when it brushes his still-bleeding scratch.

Midoriya waves to Yoarashi, then takes hold of Shouto's arm and tows him back through the crowd of students.

It's about that point that Shouto realizes something's wrong.

For one thing, Midoriya's uniform is crooked and haphazard as if he changed in a hurry; Shouto knows he can't tie a tie to save his life, but he doesn't usually miss button holes like that. For another, he doesn't let go of Shouto even when he catches up, and his grip is tight—so tight it's almost painful. Shouto is easily keeping in step with him, but Midoriya's fingertips still dig into Shouto's forearm.

"*Ow*, Midoriya—"

“Sorry. Just come on. Don’t look back.”

“What—you’re not making any sense, what are we even—”

Midoriya meets his eyes, and the smile is still on his face, but it looks more fixed and less sincere. “We’re having a conversation. I’m saying something to make you feel better about the exam. Maybe you’re laughing at something I said. Just *come on*, okay?”

Confused, and now faintly alarmed, Shouto lets Midoriya squeeze bruises into his forearm as they make their way back inside, to a spacious room behind closed double doors. Aizawa is there, but so is Gang Orca, and the exam proctor Mera, and several others.

Aizawa is at his side in an instant. “You all right?”

“I’ve been better,” Shouto says, still confused. “I don’t understand—I know I failed, but…” His voice trails off, and he looks from Aizawa to Midoriya in the hopes of getting some kind of clue. As soon as he meets Midoriya’s eyes again, his blood runs cold.

The mask of calm is gone, and Shouto hasn’t seen Midoriya look this haunted since the night he was rescued from Kamino.

Shouto looks to Aizawa, swallowing his dread at his teacher’s grim face. “Sensei, what’s going on—?”

The doors open again, and a handful of Orca’s men come rushing in, looking harried. “It’s no use,” one of them says, voice low and apologetic. “He vanished into the crowd once Todoroki left. We lost him.”

“Her,” another murmurs.

“Is this about Yoarashi?” Shouto asks.

“Did he say anything to you?” Aizawa asks.

“Oh, he said *plenty*,” Shouto blurts out, then shakes himself. “But—what about him? If there’s a problem with him, then shouldn’t you be talking to the teachers from Shiketsu?”

Aizawa’s face darkens, and Midoriya squeezes his arm again.

“Th-that—” Midoriya’s voice shakes. His face is drawn and pale, making the freckles stand out darker. “Todoroki, that wasn’t Yoarashi.”

A change of clothes is retrieved, a pair of shoes slipped on and tied with hot pink laces.

She trots into the shelter of an alley with a skip in her step and a hum at her lips, daydreaming of the next time she'll get to see Izuku. She wishes she could have talked to him. Given him her number, even! Well, *a* number. Oh, what if she'd gotten his!

For now, she's satisfied with the vial of blood in her pocket. There's so much she can do with that.

Chapter End Notes

CW: Bullying, verbal abuse/harassment, referenced child abuse, nonconsensual touching (it's Toga again).

I want to give a big thank you to IntrospectiveInquisitor for helping me write Shouto getting bullied.

Chapter 47

Chapter Notes

Your daily dose of ART:

gentlyroyalblue

anonymous

marenwithanm

your-kind-hearted-anon

gingerspice547

littleblueberryartist

punchtheimpossible

As always, this story has a TV Tropes page!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Inasa's skull is pounding, but he tries not to let it show on his face. All things considered he's in a pretty foul mood, at least by his own standards, but he tries not to let that show either.

He remembers almost nothing useful, just the girl's face and the sting of a needle, before waking up draped over a toilet tank with one boot soaking in the bowl and a woman standing over him, dressed in the uniform of Gang Orca's agency and looking incredibly relieved to find him crammed into a bathroom stall.

The indignity would be bad enough, but then he finds out that he's missed the main exam. The rest of the participants are outside receiving their scores, and Inasa has spent the entire thing drugged in a public bathroom.

Then he finds out he's lucky to be alive, because his attacker was none other than Toga Himiko of the League of Villains. She has the highest estimated body count of the league's current lineup, which means that the fact that he was found drugged instead of dead was, at best, statistically unlikely.

But it's no use dwelling on what-ifs. For now he finds himself bustled

into a room where his homeroom teacher, the exam proctor, Gang Orca, and a handful of other concerned-looking adults are waiting with…

Oh. Just his luck. He's disheveled, his foot and the edge his cape are soaked in toilet water, he has a vicious headache, and he's being pushed into a room with Todoroki Shouto and his green-haired friend with the creepy eyes.

"What are they doing here?" It comes out more confused than angry. If he was attacked by a villain, he'd be debriefed, wouldn't he? Unless… "Wait, did they get attacked too?"

Gang Orca nods. "From what we can tell, it looks as if Todoroki Shouto was the main target of this attack. Toga used her quirk to copy your form in order to remain undetected."

Shocked, Inasa shoots them another glance. Todoroki gives him a look that he can't read. His friend's face is bland and emotionless. Between the two of them, something curdles in Inasa's gut; the caustic mix of dread, anger, relief, and retroactive terror within him clashes with the bland calm he sees around him, and it sets his teeth on edge.

"Did you get a look at her?" His own sensei rests a hand on his shoulder. "Did she say anything to you?"

"It's no good," Inasa says, shaking his head. "I was headin' out to the main exam, then she was there stickin' a needle in me, and then the next second I was wakin' up. She didn't say anything. She didn't look anything like the pictures they have up, either. Must'a taken someone else's form first—some girl from Ketsubutsu."

As he goes on to describe her in more detail, Todoroki stands up straighter. "I saw her before—she tried to attack me in the first round, but I eliminated her before she could get close." Beside him, the other boy shifts from foot to foot and says nothing.

"Midoriya," one of the other adults, recognizable as the underground hero Eraserhead, addresses Todoroki's classmate. The name tugs at Inasa's memory. He knows that name, doesn't he? "Go wait out by the bus. You've done enough."

"Just a moment," Gang Orca speaks up. "I'm curious. You did well, warning me while minimizing the risk of alerting the villain—she might have panicked otherwise. But how did you know? Are you familiar with Yoarashi?"

“Not really.” Midoriya’s voice is just as emotionless as the rest of him. “We just met today. But I know Toga, a little. When—” He shoots a glance at Inasa. “I was with the League for three days, and Toga doesn’t care much about boundaries. You get to know her whether you want to or not.”

Inasa gapes at him. Midoriya *Izuku*, of course! That whole mess in Kamino was to save him and one of his classmates from the League.

“She’s an actress, but… I noticed things, when I came to help hold off Gang Orca,” Midoriya goes on. “The way she moved, the way she fought, the expression on her face. They were… familiar. Really, uncomfortably familiar. And I heard some of the stuff she was saying to Todoroki, and that confirmed it.”

“Such as?” Eraserhead prompts.

“Nothing that I care to repeat,” Todoroki says icily. “Attacks against my family, that sort of thing.”

“She gets under your skin,” Midoriya adds quietly. He leans over to bump Todoroki’s shoulder gently. “Like a tick. She’s good at that.”

“There’s one more thing,” Todoroki says. “I believe Midoriya was also targeted—just more indirectly than I was.” Midoriya looks up, like this is news to him too. “When he came to bring me here, Toga stopped me from following right away. She held me back just long enough to —to greet him. She made a point of speaking with him. I don’t know if she knew by then that he recognized her. But I’m pretty sure she wanted him to.”

“I’m gonna sleep *real* good tonight,” Midoriya remarks.

There’s a tired cough, and Mera clears his throat to speak. “If there’s nothing more to be learned about the villain, then all that remains to discuss is the test itself.” He nods to Midoriya. “You already had a passing score to begin with. If anything, this incident confirms it. You have our thanks and congratulations.” He looks to Todoroki. “As for you, I’m afraid you’ll have to attend the make-up exam in April for the failing students—”

“Wait, what?” Midoriya says sharply, eyes snapping to Mera. It’s the most emotion he’s shown since Inasa walked in.

“Midoriya,” Eraserhead warns.

“No, that’s not fair!” he protests. “He was doing fine until she showed up! How can you fail him when she sabotaged him on *purpose*—”

“Midoriya, it’s fine,” Todoroki says tersely.

“It’s not fine! This isn’t fair, I know for a fact you wouldn’t have failed if she hadn’t—”

“I might as well have!” Todoroki cuts him off. “You weren’t there, I was. I as good as failed.”

“You didn’t fail, you were attacked by a *villain*—”

“That just makes it worse, doesn’t it?” Todoroki interrupts him again, and Midoriya twitches at his harsh tone. “Forget the simulation. A real villain showed up and I played right into her hands. Don’t you get it? She found a weak spot and got into my head, and I made it easy for her. So drop it.”

The two of them glare at each other until Midoriya looks away first.

“I phrased that badly,” Mera says mildly. “Neither Todoroki nor Yoarashi have officially failed the exam. But because you were both sabotaged, our results are either nonexistent or unreliable, and therefore we must evaluate you both more accurately. I apologize for this, truly, and from what I’ve seen of your performances before this incident, I have every confidence that you both will pass in April. Remedial training will be required of you, but…” He nods at Todoroki. “If you believe that some shortcoming of yours left you vulnerable, then you’ll agree that that will be useful for you.”

Midoriya shoots Mera an icy glare until Todoroki elbows him.

“That’s enough.” Eraserhead speaks in a tone that discourages argument. “There are a few things we need to discuss, but the three of you should return to your classmates.”

Todoroki doesn’t wait for confirmation, or for anyone to contradict Eraserhead, before taking Midoriya’s elbow and towing him out of the room. Yoarashi bows, thanks them, and follows them out.

The locker room is empty when Inasa goes to change back into his uniform. He leaves his costume with those of the rest of his classmates, and fully intends to return to them as Eraserhead ordered.

But then he steps out and hears voices, coming from one of the side

hallways that don't lead to anything important, where the students had no reason to go. He's alarmed at first, naturally, until he steps closer and recognizes Todoroki and Midoriya's voices.

It's nothing more than curiosity that makes him creep closer to see—neither of them needed to change like he did, so what reason would they have to delay obeying their own homeroom teacher? Inasa makes his way closer as stealthily as he can manage, muffling his own footsteps with soft cushions of air, until he turns a corner and comes upon them.

He's always thought he knew what to expect out of Todoroki Shouto: haughty looks and cold words and much the same as what he sees in Todoroki Enji. And he hasn't known Midoriya long enough to expect anything at all.

What he doesn't expect is to turn a corner and find them tucked away while the former talks the latter through a panic attack.

Neither of them notice him, of course. Midoriya is too busy trembling violently, while Todoroki holds on to him and talks in a low, steady voice.

"It's all right, Midoriya."

"—sorry, I'm sorry I'm *sorry I'm sorry*—"

"You don't have anything to be sorry for."

"I should've known, she was here the whole time and I should've seen it, I should've known the second I stepped off that bus, I know she was watching I just know it—"

"Midoriya."

"It's me! I never miss things! I'm not *supposed* to miss things, but I missed *her*—"

"Midoriya—"

"—and she got close enough to—she could've—i-if she wanted to, I mean she was already there when I got back to you and—"

"*Izuku*. Breathe."

Inasa catches sight of the look on Todoroki's face, and it's—jarring. It looks nothing like it did all those months ago, when Todoroki shut

him down without even looking in his direction. Maybe if Todoroki's eyes had looked like this, back then, Inasa wouldn't have come to the conclusions he did.

"I should've known," Midoriya repeats, but his voice has lost its frantic edge. "I should've known, they've been so *quiet* since Kamino."

"That's not our job yet," Todoroki replies. Then, in a softer tone he adds, "Sorry I snapped at you, before. I know you were trying to help."

"It wasn't your fault, Todoroki."

"Well it wasn't yours either."

"Is your dad gonna do anything when he finds out?"

Todoroki freezes for a moment, and something like fear flashes across his face just for an instant. "No. Doubt it. Bastard's too busy with his new workload. I'll be fine, Midoriya. I'll retake it in April, and I'll pass then. Don't worry about me, all right? I'll catch up soon. And as for Toga Himiko, she didn't hurt me."

"She took your blood, Todoroki, you *know* what that means—"

"And we all know about it. The heroes know about it. If she tries anything, then you'll be able to tell the difference, remember?"

A wet sniffle reaches Inasa's ears, and Todoroki pulls his friend into a hug and lets him cry into his chest.

Belatedly, Inasa realizes that he's overstayed his welcome. This is between them, it has nothing to do with him, and his presence is an intrusion.

Still softening his footsteps, he hurries back out to the parking lot.

His classmates are curious and relieved to see him, of course. Camie musses his hair (there's not much to work with) and calls him a scrub, and Moura-senpai gently nudges him for an explanation, but he shrugs and grins and fends off questions as best he can. Eventually they take the hint and leave him alone for now, and he sighs with relief. His headache is better than it was, but he's not much for explaining himself at the moment.

The dull throb is finally ebbing when he looks up to see Midoriya and

Todoroki crossing the parking lot together. Midoriya's looking around, and eventually catches Inasa's eye and turns to Todoroki. They exchange words for a moment before jogging over, Midoriya leading and Todoroki following.

Inasa steps toward them, bracing himself. He's not sure what this is about, and he's not sure if he likes or trusts these two, but it wouldn't hurt to give them the benefit of the doubt, would it?

"Yeah?" he says.

"Okay, so—" Midoriya looks a little pale and red-eyed, but he's noticeably less blank-faced than he was before. "I know it's kind of awkward and you don't know us very well, but, I guess we just wanted to know if you were okay? After… uh, everything."

"Oh." Inasa looks back and forth between the two of them. Midoriya seems sincere, if awkward, and Todoroki simply meets his gaze and holds it. "'M fine. Head hurts a bit, but it'll pass."

"Oh, good." Midoriya looks thoroughly relieved at this. It's weird, seeing him so expressive now after he looked so blank while talking to the adults. Beside him, Todoroki makes a noise of agreement and draws Inasa's attention again.

Inasa's gut still curdles at the site of him, but the feeling is duller now. It's hard to hate someone after you've seen them hold and comfort a crying friend.

Before he can think of what to say, he finds himself presented with the top of Todoroki's head as the other boy dips in a short, sort of awkward bow. "She was targeting me," Todoroki says, without quite meeting Inasa's eyes. "Or—both of us. Either way you shouldn't have been involved, but you ended up getting caught up in it anyway. Sorry about that."

"Are you seriously apologizing to me for something a villain did?" Inasa asks incredulously.

Todoroki shrugs. "You were collateral damage in an attack against me. Whatever problem there is between us, I certainly don't want you getting dragged into something awful because of me. You can accept it or not, but it didn't sit right with us not to at least say something."

"You really don't remember, do ya," Inasa says, and for a moment Todoroki seems to shrink in on himself.

“I take it you guys have met before?” Midoriya says, glancing between them.

“It would’ve been at the demonstration, right?” Todoroki says. “For recommended students?”

“You’ll probably call it petty,” Inasa says, crossing his arms. “After I edged you out in our scores, I went up to you to introduce myself as a future classmate. You pushed past me and told me to stay out of your way.” Even out of his own mouth it feels like such a small thing, and he shakes his head. “Guess it probably sounds stupid. But it played out almost word for word like a run-in I had with Endeavor, years ago. Brought up some bad memories, and the fact that both of you were considered top-class by UA ended up souring me to the idea of attending.”

By now Todoroki is staring at him, wide-eyed with unmistakable recognition—and that’s something, Inasa supposes. He had to jog his memory, but at least there was something in there to be jogged in the first place.

“Yeah, that is kind of petty,” Midoriya says.

“Midoriya,” Todoroki sighs.

“What? It is. I mean, shuffling past the fact that he judged an entire school on two people while ignoring the dozens of other UA-trained heroes who turned out fine, it’s not like you told him you were gonna kick his ass on live TV.”

“*Midoriya*.”

“Or accused him of being an illegitimate child--”

“Regardless, I am sorry about that,” Todoroki cuts him off, and Midoriya lets him. “A few things have changed for me since then, and I’m sorry you had to meet me back then. I wasn’t in a very good place at the time, and I shouldn’t have taken it out on you.”

It’s as sincere an apology as he could have hoped for; frankly, Inasa hadn’t expected one at all. “Think I might’ve misjudged you,” he admits.

Voices call out from across the parking lot—the UA crowd is calling the two of them over.

“Looks like we’re leaving,” Midoriya says. “Bye, Yoarashi. Glad you’re okay. Let’s go, Todoroki.”

“Coming.”

“Guess I’ll see you at remedial training,” Inasa says gruffly.

Todoroki’s mouth quirks to one side. It’s almost a smile.

The incident is dealt with delicately, but word spreads among the students anyway. Once they’re back at the dorms, Aizawa-sensei gives them all a brief, stern lecture on the importance of discretion with ongoing investigations before releasing them. The moment they’re all free, Izuku finds himself and Todoroki inundated with questions. It’s Iida who saves them in the end, fending off nearly the entire class long enough for Izuku to get a word in so that they can properly explain things.

“Wait!” Bakugou’s eyes widen with furious realization. “That bitch touched me!”

“What?” Kirishima looks alarmed.

“Someone touched the back of my neck in the second round! And when I turned around, all I saw was baldy and some other girl!” He seethes, scratching at his collarbone. It’s the spot where Toga slashed him in Kamino; it didn’t scar, but it was still the deepest wound he received that night.

It’s almost a relief to hear him yelling again, for all that it sets Izuku’s teeth on edge. Bakugou has been eerily quiet since the results of the exams were released. He’s the only one besides Todoroki who didn’t pass, and his tense silence is far more unnerving than his usual volatile rage.

Todoroki seems fine, for the most part. The temperature in the common room stays steady, and his usual calm facade doesn’t seem to be a strain on him. He’s quieter than usual, avoiding questions and letting Izuku do most of the talking. At some point Mika crawls into his lap, and from that moment on he ignores the rest of the class.

It’s getting on to early evening when the others finally disperse, to talk amongst themselves, share the news of the exam results with family, or in Iida’s case, go straight to bed in preparation for the start of the new term tomorrow. Todoroki dozes on the couch with Mika curled

up on his stomach, and Izuku is about to join him when Hino sits down heavily next to him. It's sudden enough to startle Rei, who perches on the back of the couch and swats at his head.

"You know," Hino says. "When I told you what I did, at Kamino, I never said anything about you keeping it to yourself."

Izuku looks at him, confused.

"Not about me," Hino says quickly. "You can, uh. You can do what you want with that. But—c'mon, kid. You've been quiet about Dabi. Have you even told anyone?"

"Sent in a tip." Hino doesn't know sign language, so Izuku keeps his voice at his usual muttering volume. "Straight to Tsukauchi."

"Fat lot of good that'll do," Hino snorts. "You know how many crackpot tips get called in to the police these days? Loads. I used to do stupid shit like that in high school. No—tips aren't good enough. If you're worried about telling people about your power—All-Might knows now, doesn't he?"

Izuku purses his lips. "Todoroki said Toga brought up his family. Did she—?"

"Talk about how much he took after daddy dearest? Yeah." Hino pulls a face. "Clever little tart brought up my sister, too. She hit him right where it hurt."

"Do you think… that maybe Dabi…?"

Hino frowns deeply, pursing his lips. "Hm… damn. I didn't think to ask the ghosts around her, when they told me who she was. But… nah. For one thing, he wouldn't have had to. Yoarashi—the real one, mind you—compared him to Endeavor before the second round started, and Shouto took it about as well as you'd expect. If she saw that, she could've built off of it."

"Is there another thing?"

"Yeah." Hino frowns. "She thought it was Endeavor who scarred him. His brothers didn't stick around long, but they didn't clear out 'til after my sister was hospitalized. Fuyumi knew, and she wouldn't have fibbed, not even to protect them. She's not the bravest girl, but she's sensible and honest."

Izuku's mouth twists. "Okay. Okay, you're right." He looks at Todoroki, who still dozes fitfully on the other end of the couch. "I think… I'll tell him, at least. I don't think it should get out now. We just lost one number one. Much as he deserves it, now's not the time to start discrediting the new one. Not until things are more stable."

Hino sighs harshly. "Fair enough, it's your world. I'm already dead, so what do I care."

"Please stop pretending to be an uncaring asshole, it doesn't work anymore."

"Eat me," Hino snorts, then adds, "Heads up."

Izuku looks up to see Bakugou approaching, and braces himself on instinct. He doesn't shake; he might have, if Bakugou had taken him by surprise. But it's hard to get caught off guard when he's surrounded by invisible people willing to warn him about things.

So he watches, warily, as Bakugou stalks toward him and past him, every inch of him tense. "Deku," he bites out. "Meet me outside later. We need to talk." Without waiting for a reply, he keeps walking. Rei blows a raspberry that he doesn't hear.

"Charming," Hino says dryly.

"That's Bakugou," Izuku murmurs. "He's always been like that."

Ignore him, Rei says. *He's stupid and he'll just hit you again.*

Izuku sighs deeply. She's probably right.

"Are you going to?"

Izuku jumps; Todoroki's eyes are shut, but apparently he's awake and aware. "I thought you were asleep."

"He's loud." Todoroki opens his eyes halfway. "Curfew's soon. Think he'll be done in time?"

"I don't think it'll matter to him," Izuku says. "What do you think?"

Todoroki's mouth tightens a little, only for a moment. "I try to avoid wandering outside after dark with someone I don't trust," he says. "And you don't trust him."

"Not really…" Izuku's voice trails off. In his mind, he goes back to the

warehouse in Kamino—the taste of blood, the burn of his broken wrist, Bakugou's hand shaking against his shoulder as it heats up and *I don't fucking want to!* "I don't *not* trust him, anymore." He swallows hard. "Kamino changed things."

"How so?"

"I don't *know*." Izuku's voice cracks. "But things are different now, somehow, and I don't know if it's because of me or him or both of us —but—" His chest feels heavy. "I think I have to."

"You don't have to if you don't want to—"

"I can't just avoid him—"

"You told me once that avoiding things that hurt you doesn't count as weakness," Todoroki says sharply.

"And it didn't change *your* mind, either," Izuku shoots back.

Todoroki doesn't answer, except with a look of flat disapproval. It's almost identical to the looks on Hino and Rei's faces.

"If this is because of what I told you about—about what happened years ago…" Izuku's throat closes up. "I told you because for the first time in years it felt okay to talk about it. Not because I need protecting. He's bully, not a villain. I can handle him." Todoroki looks unconvinced, Rei even more so. "Also, he said he wanted to talk. And Bakugou… I don't think he's ever said that to me before. So… that's something."

"Will it last?" Todoroki asks dryly.

"Maybe not. But it's worth it to try."

Todoroki holds his gaze a moment more, then shrugs and looks away. "Try not to get dragged into a fight. You'd get suspended before the first day of the new term."

With a sigh, Izuku gets up. "If he just wants to pick a fight, then I'll leave. I'll see you later."

For a moment it looks as if Todoroki wants to say more, but in the end he shrugs and lies back again. "I'm keeping your cat."

"That's what I thought you were gonna say."

He doesn't want to go, if he's being honest. He wants to go to bed, he wants to forget about everything that happened today, he wants to do anything but deal with Bakugou.

But he also wants this dealt with. He wants—

He wants things that he can't have, but that's nothing new.

Bakugou is waiting for him just outside. It's not yet curfew, but it's close enough that Izuku knows they probably won't finish whatever this is before getting yelled at. He walks down the steps, hands clenched in his pockets, and watches Bakugou turn and walk away with a jerk of his head.

"Let's go."

"We can't talk out here?" Izuku asks. Hands close around his wrist, and he looks back to see Rei clutching him, scowling darkly at Bakugou's back.

Bakugou pauses. "Fine, if you don't mind people hearing when we talk about your quirk." His eyes narrow. "Or your quirks."

Hearing those words is like being plunged into ice water. Numbly, Izuku follows him.

They don't go far. But where they do go is a place with fewer cameras, fewer lights, fewer chances of being interrupted. Izuku's hands are clammy, his pulse pounds in his ears, and it takes a few tries to breathe normally again. He forces himself blank, like he always does.

"What's this about." Izuku's voice sounds hollow even to him. They're a safe distance from the dorms. No one's likely to overhear them, even if they yell.

Across from him, Bakugou scowls, his hands deep in his pockets. "So how many do you actually have?" he asks, his tone grating.

Rei pulls closer as Izuku answers. "How many what."

"Don't play games with me," Bakugou grits out. "I know you have more than one quirk. Two, at least. Would've thought it was fucking impossible, but then we met *him*."

Izuku winces. Part of him wants to say *it has nothing to do with All For One,* but really, it has everything to do with him. He opens his mouth

to reply, but his throat closes up and it feels as if his stomach is trying to crawl up his throat. He's not safe anymore. This isn't Todoroki or Uraraka or Iida or All-Might. The last time he answered a question like this from Bakugou…

"Well?" Bakugou snaps.

"Why do you think that?" Izuku asks, voice shaking. "Strength isn't enough for you?"

"Do you think I'm stupid?" Bakugou's voice rings out like a gunshot. "You think I don't notice how fucking *off* you are, all the time?" He pauses, making a scalding noise in the back of his throat. "They've gotta be blind or deaf, to miss so much, but I'm not. Everybody hears you mutter, everyone knows you don't shut up even if you're quiet about it, but they don't *listen*. They don't hear what you're actually saying. They don't hear you *talk* to people."

"Lots of people talk to themselves—"

"I said don't play games!"

"I don't know what you want from me!" Izuku yells back, but—that's not quite true. He does know what he wants, but— "Even if there was something to tell, why would I tell *you?*"

Bakugou's palms spark, his quirk popping and flashing with temper, and Izuku recoils as if those firecracker bursts were aimed at him. Bakugou's hands curl into fists, cutting off the bursts, and he clenches his teeth in a grimace. "What's the matter, Deku?" Bakugou asks. "Are you scared of me?" He takes a step forward, and Rei moves in front of Izuku immediately. "Think I'm a villain?"

Izuku freezes. "W-what?"

"You think I don't see it?!" Bakugou barks out. "You think I don't know what people say? I have eyes and ears and a fucking brain, Deku! I've heard what people say about you! I know something went down in Hosu! I saw you in the forest, and I was fucking there at Kamino!"

"Bakugou, what—"

"You handled them!" Bakugou yells, stepping forward. "Every single fucking time I've seen you up against a villain, you've handled them! Useless, quirkless freak Deku goes up against every villain and fucking

smiles at them! You went up against goddamn All For One and you *fucking smiled!*"

He stops, breath coming in and out in harsh, trembling gasps. Izuku stares at him, speechless, as his breathing starts to hitch.

"And all I have to do is grab you, and you fold like wet fucking paper. You're afraid. Of *me*. Villains are nothing, but *I'm* the one that scares you."

"Can you *blame* me?" Izuku blurts out. "You've been treating me like dirt since *daycare*, and you're surprised that I flinch when you swing at me?"

"Then what about that Toga bitch? What about All For One? What about Shigaraki *fucking* Tomura? Did you think they wouldn't kill you, as long as you kept grinning like an idiot whenever they looked at you? They were *nothing* to you, but I—" His voice cracks, and he stops and presses his mouth shut, eyes widening. He's shaking, from head to toe.

"They weren't nothing," Izuku tells him. "I was always afraid, Bakugou—I'm always afraid—"

"Bullshit," Bakugou spits. "You handled them. But you don't handle me, and—why the *fuck*—" He stops again, ducking his head, raking his fingers through his hair until they twist and tangle and yank.

In spite of himself, Izuku finds himself stepping forward, past Rei. "Bakugou—"

Bakugou explodes again without warning. "What is the *fucking problem?!*" he almost roars. "*What am I doing wrong?*"

For a moment, all Izuku can do is gape. "What?"

"I started the same as you! The same as everyone! I saw All-Might, I saw how he fought, how he won, no matter what happened! I watched him fight, I watched him take down every villain he went up against, and I wanted that! I wanted to *be* him!" He stops for a moment, chest heaving. "And you kept chasing that, no matter how fucking hopeless it was, no matter how much of a creepy, worthless *freak* you were, and suddenly it's like you *are* him. He plays favorites and picks *you*. Nobody else. Not me, not fucking Half-face or Ponytail or anybody else. It's *you*. Everybody fucking worships the ground you walk on, and I'm—"

To Izuku's alarm, he sees the corners of Bakugou's eyes glisten.

"That—that shithead reporter called me a villain, fucking *Aizawa* said it too, and I—"

"Aizawa didn't—"

"Shut up, Deku!" His voice cracks again, twice in a few words. "Where the fuck did it come from! Why the fuck do you have two? Why is one of them *his?*"

Izuku flinches. "You're—I don't know what you're talking about—"

"You're a liar," Bakugou snaps, and in that moment, so does Izuku.

"I know that!" he shoots back. "So out of everyone we know, why would I tell *you?*"

Bakugou recoils, eyes widening as if Izuku just took a swing at him. They narrow again, shining oddly in what little light there is. "Fine," he growls. "I don't *need* you to tell me, because I already know. All-Might plays favorites, and he picked *you*. And all of a sudden you grow a fucking quirk—maybe two. And we just—we just met that fucker in Kamino, who steals quirks—who *knows* All-Might—" He raises his head, red eyes blazing. "It's his, isn't it? You have All-Might's quirk. Not just a similar quirk, it's *his*."

There's a leaden pit in Izuku's chest, weighing him down to the stomach. Bakugou's halfway there. If only he'd had an open mind when they were seven, he'd have the whole truth. "Let's say you're right," he says shakily. "What makes you think I would tell you the truth? The last time I tried to tell you a secret, you called me a liar and set your friends on me. Why should I think this would be any different?"

Bakugou stares at him. "What fucking secret?" he snaps. "I remember you spouting some crock of shit when we were eight, but I didn't think anything about it because you disappeared right after."

"Seven," Izuku says hollowly. "We were seven, Bakugou."

"Who the hell cares?" Suddenly he's shouting again, and Izuku is flinching back. "You're not answering me! Why the fuck did you come out here if you weren't gonna—"

"*I don't know!*"

His voice echoes, cutting off Bakugou's words.

"I don't know why I'm here!" Izuku goes on, and the evening dark blurs around him with tears. "I don't know what I thought, I don't know what I wanted, I don't—I don't *know*, I just…" He tries to breathe in, and his chest shakes and hitches, and the tears finally spill over. "I wasn't going to come out here. She—they both told me not to come out. But I… I did anyway. Because I thought—you were so calm before, Bakugou. And you… you talked to me, and you didn't yell, and you didn't threaten me, and I thought that maybe, after Kamino… maybe you just…"

Izuku stands there, hot tears dripping down his face as he tries to focus on the pale blur of Bakugou's face. He doesn't hear anything from him. He's as good as blind now, and what his former friend is feeling is anyone's guess. A small, cold hand slips into his, squeezing gently.

"You want to hear something pathetic?" He doesn't wait for an answer. "I used to have these, these daydreams, right? I still do, sometimes. I-I'd imagine that… you'd come up to me. And for once you wouldn't hurt me, or threaten me, and you'd—you'd say you were sorry. You'd say you wished you didn't do all those things, and you were sorry, and you know what's really pathetic about it? I think, if you did that… if you said that, in real life, if you just looked me in the eye and said you were sorry and meant it… I think I'd forgive you." He chokes out a laugh. "Stupid, right? I'm really stupid. I should've listened. I-I'm sorry, but I… I'm so *tired*, Bakugou. I love helping people more than anything, but I don't know how to help you and I'm *just so tired*."

His body feels heavy, his throat raw. He feels wrung out from head to toe, like a damp washcloth, and right now Rei's hand is the only thing keeping him grounded.

There's silence. And then, across from him, a similar broken laugh reaches him.

"*Fuck*." Bakugou's voice breaks again. "How—how did—" The noise that he makes might be another laugh, but it's a broken, wretched sound devoid of anything remotely happy, so what would be the point of calling it that? "How did I fuck up this bad?"

Izuku doesn't answer.

"My whole life, it's been about All-Might, same as you. But *I* had a

quirk, not you. I was gonna be great, I *was* great, everybody knew that and everybody said that, just like everybody knew you were useless and creepy." He forces out another bitter laugh, voice rising. "And now you have All-Might's quirk, and *I'm* the reason he can't be a fucking hero anymore! How fucked up is that?"

Izuku jerks his head up, started. "You're not—"

"I'm not?" Bakugou snarls. "I *saw* you, Deku! You were—fuck, you had everything handled! You had plans, and all I did was run! I was a distraction! Fucking dead weight! I had to get dragged out of that fucking hole, while you were stringing those bastard villains along by the balls!"

Some part of Izuku wonders if he should feel pity. But right now, all he feels is bitterness and old, scabbed-over resentment. "You know what your problem is, Bakugou?" he says wearily. "You always make everything about *you*."

It happens quickly. Bakugou's wet eyes spark, and then his palms spark, and he lunges in a flash of temper, the way he often does when he's backed into a corner. One For All comes to Izuku on its own as he flinches back, and Rei charges forward with a shriek and slams straight into Bakugou's chest.

Izuku doesn't register it at first. He expects Rei to rush through him like she always does, so when Bakugou lands flat on his back with Rei perched on his chest and still screeching with rage, all he can do is blink in confusion. It's not until he sees Bakugou's eyes wide with shock and locked on Rei's hunched, snarling form, that he realizes what's happening.

"Rei, *no!*" Her fingers are growing long and sharp when he cries out. When she whips around to look at him, her black eyes ooze. "Let him up, Rei. Don't hurt him." She hisses a protest, and he shakes his head. "Rei, please. We'll only get in *more* trouble."

She hesitates, and a familiar crackle draws his eyes to her arms—green lightning darts along her skin.

"Leave him be," he tries to say firmly, but his voice trembles. "Let him up."

Reluctantly she backs away from him, still hissing as she returns to Izuku's side. Bakugou scrambles to his feet, and—it's not a fluke. It's not going away. His eyes are still fixed on Rei, wide with shock and

alarm.

Okay.

This is happening.

“What was that about a crock of shit?” Izuku asks.

“What the *fuck* is that,” Bakugou hisses. Rei hisses back and sparks with green.

Izuku looks down at Rei, then back at Bakugou. The terror is back, cold crawling panic threatening to creep up his spine and outward. “That’s—that’s a ghost, Bakugou.” He tries to take a breath, but it feels like he’s breathing through a straw. “She’s a ghost. I see ghosts. Y-you were right, sort of.” The lump in his throat breaks his voice to pieces, and no amount of swallowing will make it go away. “I have two quirks, and one is—one was given to me by All-Might. But th-this one is mine. It’s always been mine.”

Bakugou is silent, for a long time. He stares at Rei until the green sparks disappear, and then he blinks and flicks his gaze back to Izuku. “Where’d it go?”

“She’s still there,” Izuku says. “You just can’t see her.”

Bakugou’s face twitches. “Did All-Might know about that before he gave you a second quirk?”

“No,” Izuku replies.

“So you lied to him too, then.”

Izuku tenses, bridling. “I’ve told him the truth already.”

“But you lied to him first.”

“What of it?” Izuku shoots back. “And why wouldn’t I, after what happened when I told *you*?”

At this, Bakugou blinks at him. His eyes cloud over with shock and confusion, and something in Izuku’s chest—some squirming, twitching uncertainty—finally settles.

“Bakugou,” he says cautiously. “Do you even… do you even remember what happened when I told you?” Bakugou blinks at him again, and part of Izuku is satisfied at how desperate he’s starting to look. “Do

you even remember what I told you at all?"

"It was…" Bakugou's eyes flicker to Rei—or to him, the empty spot where Rei was previously standing—and back up to Izuku's face. "It was back in second grade, right? Fuck, it was that fucking long ago, you can't expect me to just—"

"Yes I can," Izuku cuts him off. "Because I remember it."

The closet is always with him, just out of his reach unless he's in the throes of panic. It's cloudy otherwise, all vague feelings and wispy, incomplete memories.

"I've tried to forget," Izuku continues. His eyes burn, but they're dry. He's run out of tears already. "I try every day to forget. But I can't, because that day—it changed *everything* for me. It changed *me*, and because of that, I can't… I don't know how to not lie anymore." His throat bobs as he swallows. "And that's why I'm afraid of you, Bakugou. That's why—that's why I don't see you the way you want to be seen. Because you want to be a hero, and yet you can hurt someone like that." Rei clutches his hand again. "You can hurt them so bad that they still think about it and the scars still itch and it's shaped the person they are, and not even remember. It was the worst day of my life, Bakugou. But it was just another Wednesday for you, wasn't it?"

Only silence meets this. It stretches long enough for Izuku to be sure that Bakugou won't answer, long enough for Rei's temper to cool.

"For what it's worth, you're wrong," Izuku says. "It wasn't you that caused All-Might's end. If anything, it was me." Bakugou jerks his head up. "He gave me his quirk. His power was already on the way out, and by Kamino he was running on fumes. You had nothing to do with it."

When Bakugou speaks again, his voice is raspy and quiet. "The hell I didn't—"

"He's right, young Bakugou. You should listen to him."

Bakugou's palms spark again, this time with alarm. It's only All-Might, and Nana of course, striding down the walk to join them. It's well after dark, well after curfew, and Izuku ducks his head. All-Might passes him, pausing with a gentle hand on his shoulder to check for injuries, and then moves on until he reaches Bakugou. Nana stays by Izuku's side, hovering over him and Rei in an almost protective manner.

“I didn’t want to interrupt,” he says with a sigh. “It seemed important, what you were talking about, and since it didn’t quite come to blows, I didn’t step in. But Midoriya is right. What happened at Kamino was not your fault.”

Bakugou’s fists clench. “I didn’t even—”

“What happened at Kamino was this, young Bakugou,” All-Might says. “I did what I have always done. I did my *job*. Do you think a hero begrudges those that he saves, for not rescuing themselves and saving him the trouble?”

Bakugou flinches.

“Needing rescue is not a weakness,” All-Might continues. “It is not something to be ashamed of. How would heroes do what needs to be done, if they resented and looked down upon those they should protect? You are not to blame for what happened to you, young Bakugou. Nor are you to blame for what happened to me. *No one* is to blame but the villains who have harmed us.”

Another flinch, this time when All-Might reaches out and rests his hand on the back of Bakugou’s head.

“You’ve made a great many mistakes,” he says. “Some can be fixed, some can be forgiven, but that isn’t for you to decide. All you can do is learn, and move forward, and fix what you can. That’s what everyone does, when they make mistakes. That’s what I try to do.” Gently he draws Bakugou into the lightest hug possible, just one arm across his shoulders and no more. “I’m sorry that I didn’t realize you were struggling.”

Bakugou doesn’t return it. He doesn’t quite pull away, but he doesn’t lean into it either. He stands stock-still and ramrod-straight, fists still clenched at his sides. “This isn’t—” Bakugou’s voice is rough and quiet. “It wasn’t supposed to be this way.”

All-Might lets him go, and Bakugou steps back and out of his reach, still looking at the ground. “Far too many things are out of our control. All you can do is decide what to do with what you can control. Your choices, your actions, your reasons.” He pauses. “I’m not blind. I know that so many heroes that came after me were chasing my image. But you can’t just pick and choose what you like about being a hero, and ignore the rest. You want to win, and that’s good—but you can’t forget why. We don’t triumph for its own sake; we fight to win so that we can save people. It does a hero no good to only

think of his own desires. And Midoriya was right—it isn't always about you."

Izuku ducks his head.

"Why him?" Bakugou's voice cracks. "Why—why'd you pick him?"

"A few reasons," All-Might answers. "But at the end of the day, I chose him because I was afraid, and he gave me courage." Izuku's breath hitches, but All-Might doesn't seem to notice. "And… this can't get out. You know that, right? The power that I gave him has been a closely-guarded secret for generations, and the world is… well, it's about to get more dangerous. Do you understand, young Bakugou?"

Bakugou nods.

"Good. In any case, it's well after curfew," All-Might continues. "The first day of the new term is tomorrow. Come back to the dorms, now. Aizawa wants a word with you, before you go to bed."

The walk back is quiet. Nana's hand rests on Izuku's shoulder, Rei's curls into one of his, and All-Might falls into step beside him.

"All right?" he asks, and his eyes hold far more—concern and pride and an unspoken apology.

"'M fine," Izuku murmurs back. All the while, Bakugou says nothing.

Sure enough, Aizawa-sensei is waiting for them when they return. He doesn't quite look angry, but he does look thoroughly unimpressed.

"I'm sure you both had an excellent reason for wandering around nearly a half hour past curfew," he says flatly. "And I'd love to hear it."

Izuku shuts his eyes and braces himself for a punishment. "We were __"

"It was my idea," Bakugou bites out.

Izuku has to make an effort not to gape at him. "We were having a conversation," he says.

"A conversation." Aizawa has the look of a man with a seven-hour-long migraine. "And is there a reason why this conversation couldn't have taken place inside? Or tomorrow?"

“It got sort of personal,” Izuku answers. “And loud.”

“If I may, Aizawa,” All-Might breaks in, a little meekly. “I know that rules are in place for a reason, but at the same time… their discussion did turn to things that I would rather not have been overheard. So… I’m a bit grateful they didn’t hold this shouting match in the common room. Or in either of their rooms. Thin walls, you understand.”

Aizawa gives him a withering look. “Of course,” he says acidly, and sighs again. “Obviously, breaking curfew and therefore school regulations has consequences, you’ve been told this. Both of you will report back here immediately after orientation tomorrow. You’ll be spending your free hours tomorrow cleaning the common area from top to bottom. If you’re quick, this won’t stretch over multiple days and cut into your homework time. Understand?” They nod. “Good. Go to bed.”

Izuku suppresses a sigh of relief. It’s a slap on the wrist, hardly even an official punishment. It could have been much worse. Maybe if it had come to a fight, it would have been.

Bakugou goes to the elevator, and Izuku keeps walking toward the stairwell.

“Deku.”

Izuku looks back.

Bakugou’s eyes are fixed on the elevator door as he waits for it to come down. “It—it was an *empty closet* that we couldn’t even lock.” The doors open, but he doesn’t walk in right away. “You weren’t—it wasn’t supposed to—”

“Good night, Bakugou,” Izuku says. “I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

Todoroki is still awake, after Izuku is finished getting ready for bed. His room is dark when Izuku taps on his door and opens it, but when he looks at his friend, he finds Todoroki watching him, as if he’s been waiting for him.

“How’d it go?” Todoroki asks when Izuku settles down next to him.

“I don’t know.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really.” Izuku shuts his eyes. There are paws walking along his leg; Todoroki must have brought Mika into his own room. “What about you? Are you okay, after… today?”

Todoroki is silent for a while. “No,” he whispers hoarsely. “I—today made me realize that, no. I’m not—there are things I thought I’d gotten over, that I haven’t.”

“You could’ve ended up a lot worse,” Izuku points out.

He’s surprised when Todoroki shifts closer and wraps an arm around him. Todoroki usually isn’t the one that initiates clinging. “Yeah,” he says hoarsely. “I know. Thanks, Midoriya.”

“You called me Izuku earlier.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Izuku says. “Anybody who takes me at my word that ghosts are real gets to call me Izuku.”

Todoroki doesn’t say much of anything after that, so Izuku huddles closer and tries to shut his mind off from all thoughts of Toga Himiko and Bakugou Katsuki.

“That was lenient of you,” All-Might remarks.

“Was it?” Shouta asks, dreading the oncoming headache. Green tea is lovely, but it can’t work miracles.

“A bit.” The former Symbol of Peace shrugs. “Considering your track record of expulsions.”

Shouta snorts into his tea. “You’re joking, right? Bakugou just resolved a dispute with *verbal communication*. I’m half-tempted to give him extra credit.”

Chapter End Notes

> CW: needles, drugging, panic attacks, referenced child abuse, verbal confrontation with past bully/abuser, narrowly avoided physical confrontation.

Chapter 48

Chapter Notes

Enjoy the art!

mitzythekitty

letheliah

peaxhymoon

martsy-m

wiredbysophi

As always, this story has a TV Tropes page!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shouto awakens to a gentle shaking and a quiet but insistent "*Todoroki, hey, Todoroki wake up.*"

Grumbling, he drags his eyelids open and glares halfheartedly at Midoriya—at Izuku?—whatever, either one—for all the good it does. His friend's eyes are a little shadowed, as they always are, but nonetheless wide-awake and bright. As Shouto's vision focuses, he sees that Midoriya is in fresh clothes already. He must have gone back to his own room at some point, so he's been up for a little while at least.

"What time is it?" he asks, still squinting through clinging sleep. "Why are you already up?"

"It's five minutes before you would've woken up anyway," Midoriya assures him. "Listen, there was—something happened last night, and I wanted to look into it, just to try out a few things, experiment a bit, just make sure it wasn't a fluke or anything and it totally wasn't! At least I'm pretty sure it wasn't, in fact I could really use your help confirming, which is why I'm waking you up instead of—"

Shouto heaves a sigh and sits up, still trying to massage his eyelids open. "What, what do you want from me?"

"I just need your input on something."

“On what?”

Izuku points to the other side of the futon. “Can you see her?” Still groggy, Shouto turns to follow the direction of his finger.

A moment later he’s wide awake, fully out from under the comforter and scrambling back with a muffled yelp. He grabs onto Midoriya’s sleeve, which steadies him enough to keep him from falling on his ass.

A little girl stands there, barefoot in a long white shirt that reaches halfway between her knees and ankles. It’s either a nightshirt or a hospital gown, but either way it doesn’t matter much when her eyes are empty black pits, her skin is corpse-white and sparking with green, and her hair is moving on its own.

“It’s okay!” Izuku whisper-shouts in his ear, before he can properly panic. “It’s okay. I was just checking. Um. Meet Rei. Rei, you know Todoroki already.”

It’s then that Shouto registers the sound of static, short staccato bursts of crackling hisses. The sound is coming from the girl’s mouth, open and turned up at the corners. She’s laughing at him.

“Rei, please be nice,” Izuku says. “Sorry about that. I wasn’t sure you’d see her.”

“Oh, I see her,” Shouto says faintly. “Um. Why is that?”

“I’m kind of working out the details myself,” Midoriya admits. “I just figured out I could do that last night, and I’m not exactly sure how or why. It’s temporary, though.”

“Oh,” is all Shouto can manage. He hasn’t been in the business of watching movies lately, but the girl—Rei—looks like she crawled out of a horror film, aside from… “Your sparks?”

“What?”

“She’s got your sparks,” Shouto says, and points. The girl’s form crackles faintly with traces of green, not unlike the green lightning that takes over when Midoriya uses his quirk. Or… one of his quirks? Is this the same quirk that gives him strength? If a ghost—and Rei is definitely a ghost, can’t be anything else—has it, then that’s definitely a connection. He’ll have to ask later.

“Yeah,” Midoriya says. “She, um, usually doesn’t.”

“Er… how long has she been…”

“About eight minutes.” Abruptly he claps Shouto’s shoulder. “Well, anyway, thanks for your input. Gotta go, good morning, see you downstairs at breakfast. Rei, stay in here until it wears off, okay?”

She garbles something in reply, signs an *Okay,* and with that Izuku is out the door.

Awkwardly Shouto sits on his bedroom floor and watches a dead little girl wander around exploring his room. He doesn’t get up to start getting dressed until she fades from view. He only hopes that means she’s gone.

As always Tenya is ready for class well before anyone else. His uniform is crisp, he’s had his breakfast and his morning run and shower, and he’s ready to take on the day.

When he steps out of his dorm room, Midoriya pushes him back in and closes the door. “I have a really weird, really forward question, please don’t punch me.”

“Okay?” Tenya blinks several times, bewildered. Midoriya looks as tired as ever, and everything about him is in a bit of a disarray—though not in a bad way, Tenya notes. He doesn’t look troubled. He looks *excited*. “I mean, of course I would never strike you! Not without due cause, of course, and believe me, that would have to be *quite* an outlandish situation, to drive me to use violence against you, so I doubt a mere question would—”

“Do you want to see your brother?”

Tenya’s words sputter to a halt.

“I mean, do you want to talk to him? For real, face to face?” Midoriya shifts from foot to foot, as if burning off excess energy. “I-I know this is, um, abrupt. I thought about it and I couldn’t think of a gentle way to ask this, I just—I figured out something, with my power, and… I was just wondering if you…”

“Yes,” Tenya blurts out. “Yes, I’d—*yes*.”

Midoriya’s face breaks into a relieved smile. “Okay. I, um. This lasts about ten minutes? And he’ll disappear again, but just to you. He’ll still be there. It’s still early, and I know you like to get to class early

but—”

“Midoriya.” Tenya’s voice cracks. “I—if you’re going to come to me and say something like—like *that*, then…”

“Right! Right. Okay.” Midoriya activates his power, that technique he calls Full Cowl. He reaches out to thin air, and—

And there he is.

He looks… pale. Startled. Green lightning darts along his skin, as if Midoriya has somehow transferred his power to him—perhaps that is how it works? Energy that Midoriya can use himself or pass along to the dead?”

When Tensei meets his eyes, for the first time since the morning he left on patrol and never came back, Tenya’s throat closes. His brother’s eyes are empty white sockets, as wide and startled and disbelieving as Tenya knows his must be.

Midoriya leaves the room at some point, but Tenya barely notices beyond registering a whisper of *ten minutes*.

“Hi, Tenya.” His brother’s voice wavers. “Long time no see?”

It’s the first time he ever walks into class with the bell.

A text from young Izuku brings Toshinori to the empty meeting room where they usually have discussions that aren’t meant to be overheard.

His successor is waiting for him by the door, looking fidgety and restless—for good reason. “Can this wait, my boy?” Toshinori asks. “If you aren’t careful, you’ll miss the start-of-term assembly.”

“I know. Don’t worry, I’ll be quick.” Izuku follows him into the room and stands there, bouncing on the balls of his feet until the door is shut. “Ms. Nana wants to talk to you.”

Toshinori freezes, still holding the doorknob.

“I don’t know how much you saw last night,” Izuku goes on. “But before you interrupted, I—it almost became a fight, but… one of my ghosts stopped it. She stopped Bakugou before he had the chance to lose his temper and throw a punch.”

“I-I saw,” Toshinori says. “I think—yes. I saw her.” It was hard to miss, at the time. It’s not every day one sees a little girl step out of thin air and knock Bakugou Katsuki flat. “That was… she… she was very young, wasn’t she.”

“I did something,” Izuku says. “To make her appear like that, visible and solid. I’m still working out the details of how, but… anyway, Ms. Nana came to me this morning and asked me if I could do it for her, because she wants to talk to you.” He pauses, glancing up at Toshinori with a cautious look on his face. “Is that… okay?”

“I…” He must look a fool, staring at his student as if the boy is speaking Welsh, but Toshinori finds himself at an utter loss for words.

“It’s fine if you aren’t,” Izuku tells him, and then frowns and sidesteps. “Yes it *is.* If it’s too much, then I understand.” He sidesteps again. “It’s completely—up to you—*knock it off, Ms. Nana*—it’s not like she can do anything unless I help her—” He swats something by his ear as if shooing off a bothersome fly, or an invisible hand. “Anyway, it’s your choice.”

“Yes,” Toshinori blurts out. “Y-yes. Please. I’d—it’s fine with me. I would—I would like to talk to her.” A lump gathers in his throat, heavy and aching.

Izuku lowers his hand to his side, and his eyes soften. “We were hoping you’d say that,” he says, and activates One For All.

Toshiniori blinks, and she’s there when he opens his eyes.

She isn’t dressed for hero work. She looks the way she did before she passed her quirk to him, hair pulled up, in comfortable clothes for training. It’s as if she’s stepped right out of one of his own memories. She’s pale, but not translucent or wisplike. She doesn’t look like a ghost or a mirage; she looks like a person, solid enough to touch.

It’s then that Toshinori realizes he’s lifted his hand to reach out to her. Mortified, he pulls back and wrings his hand at his side.

“H-hello, Sensei,” he says.

Her arms are around him before he can blink again, crushing and cold, and she’s solid enough to drive him back a few steps.

“I’m gonna go, you have about ten minutes,” Izuku says, somewhere in the background. Toshinori barely even hears him exit.

“There are a lot of things I want to say,” Shimura Nana tells him, her voice muffled from crushing him in a hug. That’s all it takes to break him.

It’s her *voice*. He hasn’t heard it since he was a child, a lifetime ago, and he’d forgotten the sound of her voice. But now here it is, the familiar pitch and timber in his ears, as familiar to him as if she’s only been gone a day.

“Toshi—Toshi, hey. It’s all right.” She pulls back, or tries, because Toshinori can’t let go just yet, so she sighs fondly and ruffles his hair. It’s almost like it used to be, except now she has to reach up to do it. “Look at you—you’re not allowed to give your boy a hard time for turning on the waterworks anymore, got it?”

Toshinori laughs, a watery crackling thing, and finally lets her go. “I-I’ll try.”

“I know you will.” When his eyes are clear again, she’s grinning up at him with her hands on her hips. “Well look at you, Stretch. If I’d known that mop-headed little scrap of nothing I tripped over decades back would end up towering over me, I wouldn’t have teased so much.”

“You wouldn’t have believed me if I tried to warn you,” Toshinori says.

“Guess not.” Her cheeky smile softens to something fond. “Hey. I know the little bean told you already, but… I’m sorry. No—” She holds up her hand as Toshinori starts to protest. “I know what you’re going to say. But the fact of the matter is, I wasn’t there. I didn’t get to teach you. I didn’t get to watch you—to *stand by you* as you grew. At least, not in a way that was helpful.”

“You gave me strength,” Toshinori says softly. “Even after.”

“You would’ve found that strength whether I was with you in spirit or not at all,” she says. “And whether or not it was my fault, I couldn’t be with you alive, I wish I was and I’m sorry I wasn’t.”

Toshinori nods, unable to find any more words.

“And… that’s what I wanted to talk to you about,” she goes on, stepping back further. “I hate to—to sour things. Maybe it’d be better to save this for next time, but… it’s important. I’ve put off a lot of things, Toshi, and it’s almost made trouble. I dawdled over helping

your boy learn to fight until he almost died at the USJ, and I dawdled over telling him the truth of who I was until that night in Hosu. I won't make that mistake a third time, Toshi." She hesitates. "I won't let *you* make that mistake."

"W-what… what do you mean?" Toshinori fights to keep his voice steady. She's been with him this whole time, he knows. And that means she was there when…

She watches him with sad eyes—or she would, if her eyes were visible. "Toshi," she says, gently chiding. "You haven't told him about what Nighteye said."

He coughs a bit, tasting liquid iron as it crawls up from his throat. "I—no," he rasps. "No, I haven't." He looks to the door, firmly shut ever since Izuku left. "And I don't know if I can."

"You can," Nana informs him patiently. "And you will. He's opened up to you about as much as he possibly can. He's told you his deep dark secret. Don't you think you owe him the same?"

"Were you there, when I spoke with his mother?" Toshinori asks. "When she told me that—that the worst way I could hurt him was—?"

Nana arches an eyebrow at him. "And you think it would hurt him less by coming out of nowhere?"

"It's going to hurt him either way." Toshinori shakes his head. "If I tell him, then he'll only dread it. Isn't it better for him to be content leading up to it?"

"You're thinking short-term, Toshi," she says, shaking her head in disapproval. "It'll come out eventually, and do you think he'll take it well, knowing that you knew about it and kept it from him?"

"I'm not sure there's any point in telling him now," Toshinori says quietly.

"Oh? Why is that?"

"I…" His throat closes up, and he grits his teeth until he can speak again. "There was a moment, in Kamino. I thought that was my time. I was sure that—that was it. But… I'm still here. And I know that I'm not past the time frame, but—I was *so sure*. And part of me wonders—did I miss it? It shouldn't be possible, but… I can hope. For the first time in six years I feel like I can *hope*, and I don't want to give him

that same hope if it's just going to be taken away."

He hears Nana's small *huh*. "Guess we're on the same page, then."

"What?"

"Look, I understand your reasons. I understand that you're scared—I understand *why* you're scared. Like I said, I've kept things from him, too, and I've *seen* the fallout. You weren't there when he tore into me for not telling him who I was to you and how I died, after he learned it from Gran." She crosses her arms, still crackling faintly with One For All, a sputtering candlelight to the beacon it once was in her. "Do you know why I didn't tell him about it myself, after that little conversation?"

"Because you assumed that I had my own reasons?"

Nana *tsk*'s impatiently—if he could see her eyes, he's sure she would be rolling them. "Honestly? It's because I took it with a grain of salt."

"Nighteye said—"

"I *know* what Nighteye said. And I agree with him; it was definitely a possibility, especially with how you were back then."

"He's never been wrong," Toshinori reminds her. "The futures that he sees can't be avoided. It's supposed to be impossible."

"Says the quirkless Symbol of Peace, talking to a dead woman."

Toshinori stares at her.

"We are two impossible people, Toshinori. The third just stepped out for a school assembly." She steps forward, arms still crossed. "I made up my mind to tell him after Kamino, once he had healed body and mind. Then he confided in you, and made it possible for us to have this talk. And I'm telling you, right now—if you don't tell him, then I will."

He sees her point. He understands what she's saying, agrees with her even, but…

"He told you his darkest secret," Nana says. "He was scared, but he did it anyway. You're scared, I *know* that. I understand. But I know you're brave, too. You can do this, Toshinori. You can take it, and so can he. And maybe, just maybe, three heads will be better than one.

Maybe we can beat this."

He's silent for a while, mulling over her words, searching for a chink in the defenses and finding none. "And if we can't?" he asks. "If it's all for nothing?"

"What's the alternative? Lie down and die?" She clucks her tongue again. "You're going to fight for that boy, and he's going to fight for you, too. And now that he's here, I'm not as useless as I used to be, which means that I can help, too. Since when have any of us ever fought for nothing?"

The smile spreads across his face, unbidden as his eyes sting with tears. "Why do you always make so much sense?"

"I *am* a grandmother, let me remind you," she says with mock haughtiness.

He laughs, face crumpling in merriment until his eyes shut tight against the tears. When he opens them again, she's gone. She must be cursing something awful, being cut off like that.

"All right," he says. "All right. I'll tell him. Let's see if we can't fix this."

The start-of-term assembly is over fairly quickly. Principal Nedzu gives them a general introduction and run-down that Izuku dozes through. The one point that catches his attention is a stray mention of internships—Todoroki had mentioned those, hadn't he? Uraraka was coaxing answers out of him on the bus ride back from the exams, and Izuku is intrigued enough to wonder. Aizawa-sensei goes into more detail during class, and leaves Izuku with a lot to think about. Gran Torino is the one connection he has from the Sports Festival and field training, but he's not a very active hero. He'll probably have to look elsewhere.

For now, though, he has duties to attend to. As soon as they're free for the day, he and Bakugou move in on the common area and start cleaning. The rest of the class is a little bewildered, though once Iida knows what's going on, he's very helpful in keeping the others from getting underfoot. No one gives him any trouble or—as Izuku feared—makes messes on purpose just to give him more work.

He and Bakugou avoid each other. There's plenty to do, so it's easy to stay out of one another's way. While Izuku runs a vacuum over the

carpets, Bakugou cleans the kitchen counter. Izuku scrubs the sinks, Bakugou dust-mops the carpetless floors. Izuku sweeps out the laundry room, Bakugou shouts the others into bringing their trash together.

And while Bakugou dusts, Izuku takes the cumbersome bags and hauls them to the dumpster outside. They're almost done by now, which is a relief. It would have sucked to have to do this after classes started.

Unfortunately, he's not quite used to this path just yet, especially when half his attention is on balancing the bags in his arms. He ends up turned around, and after a moment or two of backtracking he pauses by the wall of a building to try and get his bearings.

"The dumpsters are down that way," someone says out of nowhere, and Izuku turns to find a face watching him from the nearest wall. It's not someone leaning against the wall; there's a face literally on the wall, protruding from it and watching him with strange dark eyes.

He doesn't even register the words, because there is a *face* sticking out of the *goddamn wall* and it's *talking to him*. With a shriek, he swings the heavy trash bags right into the face, barely noticing the split-second alarm on the face before it hits. The force of the blow splits the largest bag down the middle, spilling half its contents onto the ground.

He doesn't care much about that, not with Rei hissing static-filled threats nearby, and his heart pounding so hard he can feel it in his teeth. But when he looks at the wall again, the face is gone.

His guard is still up, and so is Rei's, so he hears Aizawa-sensei coming before his teacher reaches his side. "What's going on, Midoriya?"

"There was a face on the wall," he blurts out. "I didn't—it wasn't someone I recognized, but I swear there was a face on the wall, right there, just a few seconds ago, and—" He pauses. "How'd you get here so fast?"

"You were taking a while, so I came to make sure you hadn't gotten lost. You said a face—?"

"I am *so* sorry!"

The voice comes again, and Izuku jumps. The face doesn't reappear on the wall, thankfully; this time it comes running out with the rest of its body attached. Izuku gives a shaky sigh of relief when he sees him. It's not an attacker, or an infiltrating villain; it's only another student. He's got about fifteen centimeters on Izuku, blond-haired and broad-

shouldered and clearly a year or two ahead of him. There's something familiar about him, in that vague and distant way that tells Izuku he's probably seen him somewhere but never met him in person.

"Togata-kun," Aizawa-sensei says mildly. "Is there a particular reason why you're hanging around halfway between the dumpsters and the first-year dormitories? I'm sure a top third-year student has better things to do with his time than frightening the underclassmen."

"Um, I actually wasn't frightened," Izuku starts to say, but is interrupted when Togata bends at the waist in a bow.

"I apologize, Sensei!" Togata says, straightening again. "And to you too—you're Midoriya, aren't you? I'm so sorry for startling you! I was walking the grounds, and I noticed that you looked a bit lost, so I thought I'd point you in the right direction. My classmates are used to me showing up like that, but I should've known better."

Normally Izuku would wonder at the fact that a total stranger has recognized him so easily, but considering that his photo was probably all over the news after his kidnapping, it's not all that surprising. "I-it's fine," he says. "Sorry for hitting you in the face with a garbage bag."

"It's no trouble!" Togata assures him. "And don't worry—you only *almost* hit me. You have good reflexes for a first-year!" Izuku must do something funny with his face at that, because Togata tilts his head. "Something wrong?"

Izuku ducks. "Nothing, just… was that a compliment for me or you?"

Togata blinks at him, dark eyes widening, and gives a sheepish but good-natured laugh that has Izuku grinning in spite of himself. "I guess that was a little self-serving of me. Let me try that again." He holds out a hand. "Togata Mirio, third year. It's a pleasure to meet you."

Suddenly it clicks. "You're the *pants guy*."

It's either that or the gobsmacked look on Togata's face that has Aizawa making an odd wheezing noise before stepping away. "If there's no more trouble, then I'll be going. Get back when you're done, Midoriya."

Izuku is too focused on his burning face to answer before Aizawa leaves. "Sorry. Forget I said that, it's just—I mean, I've seen, uh.

Sports Festivals. From previous years. That you were in. A-and you were kind of—uh, you were pretty memorable. Because whenever you used your quirk, you'd… lose your…" His voice trails off weakly.

"Right," Togata says, and Izuku wants to shrivel up and die.

"I'm Midoriya Izuku," he says. "I mean. I guess… you already knew that? Yeah." Rei is rolling her eyes so hard he's sure they'll roll right out of her head if she isn't careful.

"You're a little familiar," Togata admits.

Izuku winces. "From the Kamino thing, right?"

"Well, that and… you're not the only one who watches Sports Festivals. Though in my case, I had to watch your footage after the fact." Togata grins at him. "You were pretty memorable yourself—though, thankfully for a different reason than me."

"Mmmm. Mm-hm. Yeah." Izuku shrugs off the overwhelming desire to phase through the floor, which—considering the company he's keeping right now— "A-anyway, it was nice to meet you, but I have to, um…" He glances at the spilled trash and the ruined bag.

"Oh, let me help," Togata says, stepping over to help gather the garbage.

"You don't have to—"

"It's the least I can do," Togata says. "I'm the one who made you spill it, after all. It's a two-person job at this point, anyway." He's right; it's one thing to gather the trash back into the bag, and another to carry it along while keeping anything from escaping through the rip. Eventually they give it up as a lost cause, and Togata races off and returns with a fresh bag. When Izuku insists on carrying it all himself once it's full again, Togata insists on leading the way so he won't get lost.

They're nearly to the dumpsters when Togata speaks up. "I can hear you burning with questions from here. There's no need to be shy! I like meeting new people, and you seem interesting."

"You walk through walls, right?" Izuku blurts out.

Togata perks up at this, and Izuku tries not to fidget with excitement at finding someone who's happy to talk to him about quirks. "Among

other things. My quirk's called Permeation, and it lets me render myself intangible. Good for evading attacks, but sadly it only affects my body, so I literally phase through everything. Hence the… pants."

"Please forget I said that."

"Of course, Midoriya-kun."

Izuku hasn't had the best experiences with upperclassmen, but Togata is friendly and gregarious and doesn't even talk down to him. Even Rei, wary as she was at first, is soon prancing around him, teasing him with the faint breezes she creates just by moving, examining the bright logo on his jacket. She likes him, and now that Izuku knows she is—or was—an empath, her opinion of people means so much more.

"That's that, then," Togata says, once the trash is where it needs to be. "Sorry, again. It was nice talking to you!"

"You too, thanks for your help," Izuku answers.

"No trouble at all!" Togata gives him a cheery clap on the shoulder. "I'd better get back, then."

"See you," Izuku says automatically, then rethinks it. "I mean… maybe? I dunno."

Togata shoots him a grin over his shoulder. "You'd be surprised! Evening, Midoriya-kun."

"Bye, Togata-senpai."

It's only when he gets back to Class 1-A's block that he wonders what Togata meant by "surprised".

It's bright and early, classes have only just started, and Togata Mirio has not set foot in these particular hallways for two years now. So much has happened since then; he feels like a different person now.

Nejire alternates between wandering ahead and lagging behind, humming to herself as she stares at whatever catches her fancy, from an interesting poster on a bulletin board to a sparrow on a branch outside the window. Nejire's always like that; she's clever and powerful, and Mirio likes her company, but he has to wonder why she got picked to give a presentation in front of a classful of first-years.

Of course, the same can be said for Tamaki.

“You could’ve ducked out, you know,” Mirio points out as delicately as he can. It’s not that he minds Tamaki clinging to his arm like a lifeline, but he’s also got that look on his face like he’s walking to the gallows, and it’s a little worrying.

“Fat said I should work on talking to people,” Tamaki mumbles. “He said class presentations were good practice.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Mirio assures him. “Not every hero has to be good at charming crowds. Not even Sir likes it very much.” That doesn’t seem to help much, so he tries a different angle. “But I think you’ll do fine! They’re just first-years, remember? We were first-years once. Remember what I was like as a first-year? Just imagine that version of me sitting with them, cheering you on. You’ll do great!”

Tamaki ducks his head further and mumbles something about *too bright*, and Nejire pops into Mirio’s personal space with her usual brand of cheery tactlessness.

“Yeah, Tamaki, you’ll be fine!” she chirps. “All you have to do is talk about your internship! And you love your internship almost as much as Mirio does! Have you guys asked each other out yet?”

Tamaki makes a noise like steam escaping a kettle, and Mirio tactfully shifts between them as a buffer. “Nejire, we’ve said it before, we’re not—

“We’re here!” Nejire cheers, and darts through the open doorway labeled *Class 1-A*.

She reminds him of a hummingbird, flitting from one desk to the next, taking in each underclassman at her own energetic pace, firing off questions that she doesn’t expect answers to. Tamaki lets go of him as they walk in, though Mirio can still feel the nervousness rolling off of him.

He spots Midoriya sitting near the back and shoots him a grin, trying not to laugh at the bewildered look on Midoriya’s face. They only just met three days ago, and Mirio doubts he knew they’d be meeting again so soon.

Aizawa introduces them and hands things off to them—or off to Mirio, at least. Tamaki’s fragile nerves fail him, and Nejire is fascinated with the tiny horns and pink skin on one of the girls sitting near the front. That’s okay—if he takes charge, then they can add their own points.

Starting with a deep breath, Mirio gives a rundown of internships: they're a more focused version of the post-Sports-Festival field training they've already done, and an opportunity to use the connections they made to gain experience. *Real* experience. Nejire chimes in from time to time, and even Tamaki screws up his courage to add a few details of his own, and Mirio couldn't be more proud.

He's about two minutes in when he realizes that something's going a bit wrong. Some of the kids are paying attention; Midoriya and the brown-haired girl sitting in front of him seem to be hanging on to his every word. But quite a few of them are looking at him with the blank expressions of bored students staring off into space. There's one boy who isn't looking at him at all; Mirio recognizes him as the winner of the first-years' Sports Festival.

There's a problem here, and it's not hard to discern, if one considers this particular class's track record. They've seen more villain action than any other first-year class that UA has ever had. They've had experience with villains; a lot of them probably don't think much of what this kind of training can offer.

There's an obvious solution of course; if telling them doesn't work, then why not show them?

Ten minutes later, with Aizawa's leave, they're all dressed for athletics and gathered in one of UA's training gyms. The others are sitting this out; Nejire's quirk is a bit too heavy on brute force and destruction for a display like this, and Tamaki hasn't eaten anything useful yet. It's a simple enough demonstration: Mirio invites nineteen first-year hero students to attack him.

Now, Mirio doesn't know Bakugou Katsuki personally, but he's also not at all surprised that he's the only one of them who doesn't hesitate. The first-year leads with his swinging right hand, impressively fast. Mirio goes intangible from the waist up, and the explosive attack passes harmlessly through him but reduces his shirt to charcloth.

He gives Bakugou a moment of bewilderment before he drops down beneath the floor.

This part used to terrify him, when he was little. Permeation renders him completely intangible, down to every cell, and not just for solid matter. Light passes through his retinas, air passes through his lungs, sound waves pass through his eardrums. When he gives himself so

completely to his quirk, he is blind, deaf, and suffocating.

Luckily, it has an interesting side effect: when he releases his quirk, rather than getting trapped in the floor, he shoots straight out and up. With practice, coordination, and a little foresight, he can aim just so. In this case, he can aim his trajectory directly into the first-year student above him.

Bakugou goes down in that one attack, dazed, disoriented, and retching a little. That might have been overkill, but judging by the way the kid is glaring at him, he's probably all right.

The rest of the class rallies, alarmed into action by Bakugou's quick defeat, and Mirio dives into the floor again. He aims first for the close-range fighters, then for the long-range fighters, and they're unprepared. Maybe they've never faced an enemy that they could neither see nor hit. Some are quick, others are lucky, but it's like Sir says—nothing beats cold hard experience.

Eventually, most of them are out of commission, dazed or incapacitated by his quick and efficient assault. The only students that he hasn't taken down are Midoriya, who's watching him with an almost unblinking stare, and Todoroki, who's standing off to the side without joining in. Mirio glances at the latter just in time to see him cup his hands around his mouth and call out the driest encouragement he's ever heard.

"Punch him in the throat, Midoriya."

Midoriya shoots him a quick glare, though there isn't any real venom behind it. There's a bruise blooming on his jaw where Mirio managed to clip him. "You're bringing that up *now*?"

"It's either that or watch your surroundings better."

"How about you get over here and join in!"

"Can't, I don't have my provisional license."

Banter is all well and good, but it makes for a tempting distraction. Mirio dives beneath the floor again and moves, aiming in the direction that he knows Midoriya was standing. He shoots up from beneath again, bracing himself for the inevitable impact, but he finds Midoriya out of his reach, still watching him intently.

The younger boy's lips move, and Mirio barely hears what he's

muttering— "*Stay on him, stay on him, stay on him, don't lose him for even a second--*"

Mirio vanishes for another attack, and Midoriya dodges him yet again. No matter how Mirio attacks, or from which direction, Midoriya's eyes are never anywhere but fixed on him.

In spite of himself, Mirio grins.

He can't tell whether it looks flashy or comical, launching himself from the floor again and again while Midoriya dodges him. It only takes a few for Mirio to realize his game—one way or another, Midoriya has a way to predict him, and his minimal dodging expends far less energy than Mirio's attacks. Midoriya's trying to wear him down.

Well, that won't do at all.

The next time Mirio comes up, he stays up. Midoriya is quick and clever, but he doesn't have a game plan for direct combat, and Mirio doesn't give him time to think of one. He ends the fight with a move he learned from Sir, and steps back to let Midoriya recover and get his wind back.

"That was impressive," he says, and hopes he doesn't sound condescending about it. "I mean that, it was really good."

"*Thanks*," Midoriya wheezes.

By some miracle Mirio managed to keep his pants this time, though he does have to retrieve his burnt shirt to put it back on. "In any case, that's the point I was trying to make," he says, turning back to address the others. "Versatility. Classroom training is necessary for building up your skills, but internships take away the controlled environment that comes of learning from teachers and simulations. It enables you to adapt more quickly to unfamiliar situations and opponents, so that you aren't caught off guard by every new battle. I hope that makes sense!"

Looking around, he sees that he's garnered the desired reaction. Most of them are looking on with renewed interest. The redhead with the hardening quirk looks ready to burst from excitement.

Midoriya shuffles past him, still favoring the leg that Mirio kicked to take him down, and takes a few back-slaps and head-ruffles from his classmates. Mirio watches his back, pursing his lips against the bright

smile that wants to take over his face.

A chill passes through him, startling him. It's not an ominous feeling; it's really not that bad at all. But it's unfamiliar, like having a quirk used on him, or being watched, or someone giggling at him behind his back.

He looks, but there's no one there.

All-Might asks to speak with him after class that day. Not in their usual room, or at the dorms, but on the jogging path that winds through the campus grounds.

"You wanted to talk to me?" Izuku says cautiously when they meet. He doesn't like the look on All-Might's face. It's the same look he had before they had their conversation about All For One, and this time Izuku doesn't know anything ahead of time. He looks to Nana for help, but she nods toward All-Might.

"We would've had this conversation once you were healed from Kamino, but then you opened up to him," she says. "Just—listen, okay? Listen and keep an open mind."

Because that's not ominous at all.

They walk together down the wooded hill that surrounds UA, until they're well away from the campus proper. It's a little better like this, when they're out in the open and walking the school grounds instead of cooped up in that sound-proofed room. It mustn't be that dire, then, right? If this is a conversation that All-Might can have with him outside, then… it can't be that bad. No earth-shattering secrets.

"What do you know of the hero Nighteye?" All-Might asks, a little abruptly.

Izuku looks at him, surprised. That's not at all how he expected this conversation to start. "Nighteye… you mean… your former sidekick Nighteye?"

"Is there another that I'm not aware of?"

"Right," Izuku says sheepishly. "Sir Nighteye. He's a little obscure, and not very highly ranked. But that's mostly because he's not in the public eye very much, now that he doesn't work with you anymore. I don't think anyone even knows what his quirk is. He almost qualifies

as an underground hero, except a lot of his sidekicks end up rising to prominence. His agency's pretty sought-after by new heroes who want to make a name for themselves, but he's supposed to have really strict standards."

All-Might heaves a sigh. "That he does," he says, as if to himself.

"Actually, outside of actual pro heroes, most people just know him as your former sidekick," Izuku continues. "People used to speculate a lot about him, until he struck out on his own six... six years... ago..." His voice trails off as realization strikes. He doesn't think about Nighteye often, so he's never made the connection until now.

"Yes," All-Might says. "Six years ago."

"Did you still work with him sometimes, after he left your agency?" Izuku asks cautiously.

"No." All-Might's mouth tightens a little as they continue their walk. "No, I never had the occasion. But Nighteye and I worked together for years, before my injury. And very well, might I add." All-Might's voice takes on a wistful note. "Very well. Most of my best successes would have been impossible without him. In fact, he was more or less the brains of the operation, more often than not."

"That's... wow, that's kind of incredible," Izuku admits. "I-I mean, I guess I always assumed he was learning from you. You know? But I guess that's not giving him enough credit." He chews this over, trying to fit this new information into his preconceptions. "Why are you telling me this?"

All-Might stops walking. They're alone; not even ghosts hang around in these woods. The only ones besides themselves are Nana and Rei. "I don't think I need to tell you that this stays between us," he says. "Not only for our sakes, but for the sake of an old and dear friend."

"I kind of figured," Izuku says.

"And…" All-Might looks pained. "And I'm sorry. This is another one of those things that I should have told you sooner. Not because of the danger it might pose, but… I did not want to cause you pain."

"O-okay…" Izuku looks to Nana for help again, and finds none. He takes a deep breath and steels himself. "Okay. Whatever it is, I'll be

fine. I promise."

All-Might nods. "Nighteye kept his quirk a secret from the public for a reason. It was always an ace in the hole—*our* ace in the hole, when we worked together. It was an advantage that no villain could match, that few *heroes* could match. A form of—of clairvoyance, so powerful, so *sharp,* that his predictions were always accurate. Inescapably so. Believe me, we… experimented with it, in the early days."

"He predicted something," Izuku murmurs. "Something terrible?"

All-Might won't meet his eyes. "My boy… he predicted my death."

The ground beneath Izuku's feet seems to vanish, the world tilts on its axis, and for a moment Izuku's mind is empty. He comes back with cool hands on his cheeks—Nana is there, steadying him, speaking softly until he can register words again.

"When?" he asks, as soon as his voice comes back. "How?"

"He used his quirk on me after I defeated All For One, when I had nearly recovered from my injuries. He must not have looked for long, once he realized what he was seeing, because he couldn't offer any details. Only that I would die in a fight with a terrible villain, in six or seven years."

"That was six years ago." Izuku's mind swims. "That was—you—"

The silence that follows presses down on him like a cold hand, crushing him toward the earth. A nearby fencepost gives him a place to lean; maybe that's why All-Might stopped here to tell him.

"What happened?" he asks. "After he told you that?"

"He implored me to retire, to give up hero work in the hopes that I could escape my fate, even though we knew that to be impossible." All-Might's voice breaks. "He begged me. I refused."

"What about—Kamino?" Izuku raises his head. "Kamino was—it could've—" The lump in his throat grows too thick to speak around. "Did you have him use it on you again, after you defeated All For One the second time? That was between six and seven years after you first fought him. Maybe it's changed."

All-Might shuts his eyes. "My scars were still fresh, when he gave me that prediction. He saw what that battle had reduced me to, and it

terrified him. When I refused to listen to him, he said that he couldn't just stand by and watch me die. We haven't spoken since."

The boy is quiet for a long time. He no longer looks like he'll fall without the fencepost's help, but Toshinori can't read what's on his face.

"Is… there anything else?" His voice wavers.

Toshinori hesitates, lips pursed, wondering if he should leave this part out, but—no. He deserves the truth, as whole as Toshinori can make it. "I misspoke," he says. "Nighteye and I—we have… communicated, recently. Nothing so dire as, as what he told me back then, but he did reach out to me, for the first time in years. It was before this year started, before you and I crossed paths. He contacted me to tell me that he had found a worthy successor for One For All." The boy stiffens at this. "I was on my way to meet with the candidate when I pursued a villain and found my way beneath a certain bridge. I made up my mind on you that day, and I… didn't make it to that meeting." Izuku stares at him, wide-eyed, and Toshinori's heart sinks with worry and shame. It's not a pleasant thing to think of, that his discovery of Izuku was—

"An accident," Izuku says, his voice hushed. "You chose me, you *found* me, by accident. It was all just, just luck and timing."

Toshinori steps closer to him, and his voice turns steely. "I have *never* regretted it," he tells him. "You have never—you've only ever exceeded my expectations since I met you, and accident or not…" His voice trails off. He had expected distress, dismay, even anger, but instead Izuku meets his words with a shaky smile.

"Good," he says. "I'm glad. That's what I always thought."

"You always…?" Toshinori says. "What do you—?"

"It was an *accident*." Izuku's voice trembles with hope. "None of this was planned. It wasn't meant to be, it was an *accident*." He pauses and swipes his hand across his eyes. "All-Might—thank you. I mean it. Thank you for telling me. It must've been hard, but I'm glad. I just—I got scared for a second, but I'm okay now. It's going to be okay."

Toshinori isn't quite sure what's going through his head, but he can tell when his student needs comfort. He pulls the boy into a hug, and Izuku's arms wrap around his middle, careful to avoid the scar that

still pains him.

“You’re not going to die,” Izuku tells him, and it’s not the shaky uncertainty of faint hope; his student’s voice is steady and certain. “I know there’s something to look out for, now. But you aren’t going to die.”

Toshinori holds him tighter. “I won’t, if I can help it,” he says. “When I first heard it, I made my peace with it. I was willing to run toward that future and meet it, as long as I left behind a successor. But then I met you. And I’m not willing to leave you behind anymore.” A sob builds in the back of his throat, and he swallows it so that he can continue speaking. “I thought it had caught up with me at Kamino, but I defied it. *You* helped me defy it, and because of that, I’m still here. And I don’t intend to run toward it anymore. Even if the future is set in stone, I’ll fight it—”

Izuku pushes back out of his arms. “It’s *not*,” he says. “I don’t believe that. The future doesn’t work like that. I *know* it doesn’t.”

There’s such conviction in his voice. He sounds so sure of this, like it’s an unshakable truth on which his entire world turns.

It makes Toshinori believe it a little more, too.

Chapter End Notes

CW: grief, social anxiety, contemplation of mortality.

I love Mirio. My mere mortal soul cannot contain the sheer magnitude of my adoration. I'm so glad that I can finally bring him into YUTS.

Quick announcement, guys! I'll be graduating next Saturday, and right after that my parents will be whisking me off on a three-week vacation. I don't know if I'll be able to get any more chapters out between then and now, but I definitely won't be getting any chapters out over those three weeks. Thanks for your patience, and for sticking with me so long!

Chapter 49

Chapter Notes

And I'm back, guys! Thanks for your patience, have some art!

chaaaaro

la-petite-jedi

tango-whiskers

could-you-imagine-it

mochiluvs

As always, this story has a TV Tropes page!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“All-Might?” Izuku says cautiously, as he waits for his tea to cool down. It’s Saturday and the common room is empty, with most of his classmates visiting family or hanging out away from the dorms.Usually he would be out as well, but after yesterday’s discussion, he finds himself craving his mentor’s presence just a little more than usual. At the moment it’s just him and All-Might sitting at the table by the dorm kitchen. “Can I ask, um… how does Nighteye’s quirk work, exactly? I mean, I know he keeps it under wraps, but… he knows about One For All, right? So you know about his quirk, too?”

All-Might hums thoughtfully over his food. Without his stomach, he has to eat small portions frequently. “The way he always described it was like looking at frames on a film reel—when he touches a living person, he can see the course of their life, second by second. There are limits, of course—he can only activate it once per day, and he has access to it only for an hour.”

“So it’s purely visual? No sound? And how much of it can he see?”

“My boy, why do you want to know?”

Izukushrugs. “I just want to know what kind of future he saw, and how he saw it,” he says. “If there was any chance that maybe he just misinterpreted it. But I guess, if it’s like a film reel…”

“Then he saw it run out,” All-Might finishes.

“How much does the frame show?” Izuku asks. “Does it show him things through their eyes, or…?”

“No. He said it was more of a limited third-person sort of view. But it’s narrow; mostly he just sees the person and their immediate surroundings.”

Izuku nods as he files away the information.

"Is there any particular reason you want to know?” All-Might asks.

“I… was thinking.” Izuku finishes drinking and pushes his cup further in. “We’ve been hearing a lot about internships lately, and—” All-Might makes a quiet, vaguely disapproving noise. “What?”

“To be honest, I was against the decision to move forward with internships, at least for first-year students,” All-Might admits. “The school took a strong stance in holding both the Sports Festival and the summer camp in spite of serious threats, and I’m not sure it’s a good idea to continue with that particular tactic, especially since… since it didn’t stop you and young Bakugou from being abducted.”

Izuku winces. “If anything, what happened in Kamino just makes the internships even more important,” he points out. “We need heroes more than ever now, don’t we?”

“You may be right about that,” All-Might concedes. “But I’m not sure if the correct response is to send heroes out even younger.”

“They wouldn’t be, though,” Izuku says. “It’d just be carrying on as normal.”

“I’m uncomfortable with it,” All-Might tells him. “Especially given everything *you’ve* been through. And despite Toga Himiko’s appearance at the exams, we don’t know where the League is or what they’re planning.”

Izuku chews this over carefully before answering. “I want to learn all I can. Aizawa-sensei said we should use the connections we made from the Sports Festival nominations if we decide to do internships, but I know Gran Torino’s not very active and… honestly, with everything we’ve talked about…” He braces himself. “Do you think you could introduce me to Sir Nighteye?”

All-Might almost chokes on his food. “I beg your pardon?”

“You said he’s been in contact with you recently,” Izuku says hesitantly. “So it wouldn’t be out of the blue. And he knows about One For All like Gran Torino did, so it’d make sense, wouldn’t it? And besides that… well, never mind besides that. Could you?”

“He has been in contact.” All-Might stops eating and lays down his chopsticks. “We’ve spoken, technically, but… not pleasantly. I don’t—I don’t have his ear as I once did. It’s just not…”

Izuku searches his face, then looks to Nana. He can tell that All-Might is trying to hide things, but he’s not good at it, and Nana is even worse. Izuku has seen enough ghosts to recognize old regret when he sees it, and the way Nana is looking at him only confirms it. “Were you and Nighteye close?” he asks cautiously. “You said you worked well together, but… you were friends too, weren’t you? You had to have been, if you told him about One For All. You wouldn’t have needed to, if you were only coworkers.”

All-Might’s mouth twitches like it’s trying to smile, but it can’t quite manage it. “We shouldn’t have been,” he says. “We had practically nothing in common from the start—he had all the sense and cleverness, and that formed the basis of our partnership. I trusted him to know the best course of action, and he trusted me to heed him. When I rejected his advice outright, it was a betrayal of that trust. I did it a second time, when he pointed me to a promising successor and I chose you instead. While I can’t regret either of those decisions, I also can’t ask anything of him. Not now.”

Izuku nods, pursing his lips to keep from frowning. “I’ll think of something else, then—”

“By that I don’t believe *I* can be the one to introduce you,” All-Might says. “But I do know someone who can, and would probably be willing. We can talk more about this on Monday, if you’re sure.”

“I’m sure,” Izuku says firmly, and the discussion ends there.

All-Might seems to hesitate for a little while, then coughs a bit to clear his throat. “I actually had a question for you, as well.”

“Sure.”

“Well, I…” At that moment, the elevator door opens, and Iida, Todoroki, and Uraraka emerge with Tensei wandering after them.

Uraraka looks a bit run-down, and Iida has a book tucked under his arm. They wave as they pass the kitchen and settle on one of the couches, well within hearing range. "…It can wait, I suppose."

"They're just taking a break from studying," Tensei explains. "Don't mind them."

Izuku nods to him, then turns back to All-Might. "Were you about to ask something about the ghosts?"

On the couch, his three friends go quiet and look up, startled. All-Might blinks, equally surprised, and switches between looking at them and looking at Izuku.

"Everybody here knows," Izuku says. "About the ghosts. So if you're going to ask about them, then it's all right."

"Oh," All-Might says faintly. "I see."

"So we can talk about it around All-Might?" Uraraka asks cautiously.

"Is anyone else safe?" Todoroki adds.

"My mom. Bakugou, technically." Izuku looks up at All-Might again. "So what did you want to ask?"

His mentor blinks a few times, recovering from his shock. "Well, actually, I spoke to your mother recently, about your quirk," he says. "And I'd like to know more, if you're willing to talk about it." He hesitates. "She suggested that I start by asking about Rei."

Izuku looks up, surprised, then glances around sheepishly. Rei isn't with him at the moment; recently she's taken to following Kaminari and Ashido around just to spook them whenever possible. She isn't hurting them, and she's having fun, so Izuku can't begrudge her that. "I'd introduce you, but she's not here right now."

"Does she follow you often?" All-Might asks.

"Most of the time," Izuku says. "Right now she's off bothering Kaminari and Ashido. She says they're fun to tease."

"Is it all right to let her do things like that?" Iida pipes up. "That seems…"

Izuku shrugs. "She's nine, I'm not gonna tell her not to have fun whenever she can."

He looks up to find Iida and All-Might both staring at him in shock and mingled horror, and realizes belatedly that dead nine-year-old girls aren't the most comfortable of conversation topics. Todoroki and Uraraka have already seen Rei, so at least they aren't surprised, but…

"Do you want to know more about my quirk?" Izuku asks. He isn't sure if he's asking All-Might or his friends. "I mean, all of it? Not just Rei?"

"I'd like to," All-Might says softly. "If you're comfortable with it."

Izuku looks over to his three friends. Todoroki is sitting up straighter, while Uraraka watches him intently. Iida clears his throat. "Whatever you're all right with telling us, Midoriya."

Izuku mentally runs through the people he knows are in the dorms. Jirou, Hagakure, and Shouji are not among them. Almost everyone is either out for the day or spending time at other parts of the campus. In fact, he's pretty sure the only other person here is Sero, who was complaining early about wanting to sleep all day.

He gets up from the table. "Wait here, I'll be right back."

It's a quick run up to the second floor, into his bedroom. He throws himself flat, reaches under his bed with groping fingers, and finds the box. It's only a plain old jewelry box that his mother gave him when he was small, held shut with a tiny lock that he quickly removes. Tucking the box under his arm, he hurries back downstairs.

All-Might rises from the table as he passes, and follows him to the sofa where his friends are waiting. Izuku sits down among them, places the box on the table in front of him, and opens it.

It's full and cluttered, items placed in with little rhyme or reason. There's no organization to it all, but Izuku knows what each one means. Photographs. Slips of paper. An old coin. A ring. A metal tag from a pet's collar.

Todoroki picks that out of the box, turning it over in his fingers. "Mika," he reads. "This was your cat's?"

Izuku takes a deep breath. "I met her old owner at the park," he says. "There was a villain attack in that area, three days before, and she died in it. She took me to her apartment, and when I got in… there was Mika. She'd been alone for three days, and Ms. Yamamoto didn't move on until I promised I'd make sure her cat was okay." He

swallows the growing lump in his throat. “I took her to a shelter first. And when no one adopted her, I went back and got her myself.”

He takes the tag from Todoroki and puts it back in the box, then takes out the ring and puts it on the table. “I found this on a beach I went to a lot, when I was training to get into UA.” Out of the corner of his eye, he sees All-Might stiffen. “I called it the ‘screaming beach’ because the place was a dump, and there was a ghost stuck in an old trashed car in the middle of it all, and—all day. She’d just… cry. All the time, until I finally found her. She lost her engagement ring on that beach, and her fiance thought she threw it away on purpose, so he cut the brakes on her car so she wouldn’t leave him. It took a while, but I found her ring the night I got my acceptance letter from UA.” His voice cracks. “She said her name was Sachi.”

He goes through a few more things. A ribbon from a child’s well-loved stuffed animal. A coin from a collection that was worth enough to save a widow from losing her house. A necklace in the shape of half a heart, with the word “Best” engraved into it.

“So you keep something from every ghost you meet.” Todoroki turns the necklace over between his fingers before putting it back.

“If I can,” Izuku says. “There isn’t always something to keep. I just don’t want to forget them.”

“And the people that… that they leave behind?” Iida says. “Do you ever tell them?”

Izuku shrugs. “I could never be sure they’d believe me, and I was always afraid I’d just hurt them, if I told them that someone they missed stayed for a little while, but they couldn’t have seen them or touched them anyway. I thought it’d just be better to let them live their lives and move on. And half the time, there’s no one to tell anyway.” He reaches into the box again, sifting through the items until he pulls out the photograph and puts it on the table. Morigawa Hitomi’s unsmiling face peers through her hair, frozen in time.

Todoroki sits forward, and Uraraka gasps softly. “That’s her, isn’t it,” she says in a hushed voice.

“Who?” All-Might asks.

Izuku swallows the lump in his throat. “I met her when I was five or six,” he says. “Back when they still scared me. She was smaller than them, even though she was older than me back then. I think she was

the first real friend I ever made." He looks around, just to make sure Rei isn't coming back. "We were both lonely. The other ghosts get scared of her. She didn't talk, and she didn't remember anything about who she was. So I just called her Rei."

He sees Todoroki's mouth twitch at that, but no one interrupts.

"She's been with me ever since. No other ghost has ever stayed as long as she has. She's like my sister. My big, little sister." He plays with the photograph, trying not to let his hands tremble. "I found this in the Kamino warehouse."

A hand closes on his shoulder, gripping lightly—All-Might's.

"I didn't know how she died," Izuku goes on. "I found their file on her, and I read about what they did to her, before they killed her. They were trying things, they were trying to figure out how to make Noumu, and they took her because she didn't have anyone and no one would come looking for her and—" His voice shakes. "She was nine when it happened. She was a little girl. They did that to a little girl."

It's then that he realizes he's probably said too much. They were horrified just learning her age, and Izuku isn't sure he can bring himself to look up and see their faces now. What must they think, knowing he can eat and sleep and live like everything is normal when he has that in his head—?

"Are they all like that?" The quiet question comes from Todoroki, sitting close enough to press up against him. From the guilty look on his face, he's asking it against his own better judgment.

Izuku purses his lips, wondering how to answer. "Not all of them," he says at last. "But—enough. Most—most people don't leave behind ghosts, if they die of natural causes. They're—they're usually unhappy. Or there's something they want to do. Or someone they want to see. Sometimes they stick to one place, sometimes they wander, sometimes—sometimes they follow people. For better or worse."

"Like…" Uraraka's nerve fails her the moment the first word is out. Her eyes are on Iida.

"Like my brother," he finishes.

Izuku nods. "Sometimes it's good. Sometimes they stay because there's someone they love. Or someone they want to thank. But sometimes

it's—sometimes it's because they want payback. I-I mean, villains—almost every villain I've ever seen has had ghosts with them. Just… following. Waiting."

"Kamino?" All-Might asks.

Izuku's breath shudders in and out. "There were so many I couldn't breathe sometimes." He shakes himself. "But that was a good thing. I had *help*. I had so much help. I don't—I don't think I'd be here right now, if they hadn't helped. And—" He swallow, trying to fix his dry throat. "All For One's as good as dead. So they've probably… they've…"

Because of me, he doesn't say. He remembers his escape, remembers ghosts reaching for him and him reaching back, recognizes now the sensation of offering them One For All, giving them the strength and solidity they need to turn and fall upon their killer and—

And Dr. Tsubasa—

He's not sorry. He'll never be sorry. They could have lived—they *could have lived* if they just hadn't killed so many people, if they hadn't given him so many angry, vengeful ghosts. They could have lived if they'd left Izuku alone, if they'd left Bakugou alone, if they'd left Morigawa Hitomi alone—but they didn't. They made their choices and Izuku will never be sorry that their crimes caught up with them in the most direct and literal way possible.

But he won't forget it, either. He's not like them. He'll remember the people he's killed.

There are arms around him—Uraraka's, then Todoroki's, then Iida's and finally All-Might's. He's surrounded by warmth and beating hearts now, driving back the memories of cold hands and misty figures. Izuku lets his eyes slide shut, lets them pull him back into the world of the living.

It feels better, talking about this. They don't understand—can't possibly understand—and they can't help. But at least he can talk about it now, with someone living who isn't just his mom. Just because no one understands what it's like to know the things he knows, doesn't mean he's alone.

And who knows? Maybe he'll find someone who does.

As promised, All-Might calls him to the faculty office on Monday, and Izuku barely waits for a nod from Aizawa before running to the locker room to change back into his regular uniform. A few of his classmates give him curious looks, but Izuku puts that aside for now. He can explain things once he gets a solid answer one way or the other.

He leaves his uniform jacket and sets off for the main school building at a run, Rei darting along with him. In his eagerness he takes a few most likely unsanctioned shortcuts, jumps a few fences and dodges at least one surveillance droid to shave off a few seconds. The top of the building is creeping into view over the surrounding roofs when Rei calls out a warning a moment too late. Izuku turns a corner as she shrieks, and nearly collides with someone.

“Sorry!” he yelps, and a firm hand on his shoulder steadies him.

“Not a problem!” a familiar cheery voice replies. “You seem to be in an awful hurry.”

Izuku blinks, and Togata-senpai’s smiling face shocks a smile out of him as well. “Oh, hi, senpai! Sorry for running into you, I just got called in from the athletic field.”

“I’m sure whoever called you in will understand if it takes you an extra minute or two,” Togata assures him. Rei prances around him unseen, looking eager. “Are you heading to the faculty office, by chance? That’s where I’m going myself.”

“Ah, yeah!” Izuku slows up to walk with him, trying not to smile at Rei’s excitement. He’s never seen her take to someone as quickly as she has to Togata. “I was discussing some stuff with All-Might, and he said he’d have an answer for me today, so…”

Togata pauses mid-step for a moment before continuing. “All-Might was the one who called you in?”

“Yeah, why?”

“It’s the oddest thing, then,” Togata muses. “He’s the one who called me in, too.”

Izuku blinks, and feels the gears turn in his own head as he adds two to two and makes four. “Um. Senpai… you wouldn’t happen to know a hero named Nighteye, would you?”

Now Togata looks even more confused. “I… yes? I’ve been interning

with him since last year. How'd you know?"

Izuku faces forward again, hoping it's enough to keep Togata from guessing what's on his mind. "Wild guess."

His senpai's giving him a shrewd look now, one that tells Izuku he's putting a few things together himself. If he does, he doesn't call him on it, though. "Huh. Well, today seems to be a day for odd coincidences, I guess! My birthday's July fifteenth, if that helps."

Izuku gapes at him. "*Shut up*, no it's not."

Togata looks positively delighted. "Wait, you mean yours is too? Is it really? Are we twins?"

"You're two years older than me, senpai."

Togata slings an arm around his shoulders. "Still counts! Twins forever."

They reach the faculty office like that, and All-Might looks appropriately pleased. "I'm glad to see you two getting along," he says, as they take seats before his desk. "It makes this conversation a great deal easier."

"I think you two have the advantage over me," Togata says sheepishly. "I might be the only one here who doesn't know what this is about. Something to do with Sir?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact." All-Might leans forward, elbows resting on his desk. "I was hoping to ask a favor of you, young Togata. You are still interning under Nighteye, correct?"

"Of course! I've learned at least as much from him as I have here at UA."

"Ah, it's going well, then."

"Sir's fantastic," Togata replies, beaming. "I was nothing special before he took me on. Not to sound dramatic, but he kind of changed my life."

"Good to hear," All-Might says with a smile, though to Izuku it looks a little sad. "As you can probably guess, young Midoriya is interested in internships himself, especially after your enlightening demonstration the other day. He's shown immense promise for as long as I've known

him, and from what I remember of Nighteye, he's excellent at teaching and offering guidance to nascent heroes. It's my belief that they both have much to gain from each other. So, with that in mind, would you be willing to introduce him to Nighteye? Perhaps show him about, if possible? I think he would benefit from your experience."

Togata goes wide-eyed with surprise and pleasure. "I'd be happy to!" he says. "I think Sir would be happy to have him, too—he lasted longer against me than anyone else in that demonstration, so there's plenty there to work with." He shoots a grin at Izuku. "I'm actually getting called in tomorrow to meet with Sir about upcoming training assignments. I could bring him in then, if that's all right?" He looks to All-Might, then to Izuku.

"I'm free," Izuku says. His heart flutters in his chest, nervous and excited. This is happening? It's really happening.

"Excellent," All-Might says. "Thank you very much for your help, young Togata. I'm quite in your debt."

"It's no trouble at all!" Togata shoots Izuku another grin. "I hope we get to work together. It'd be interesting to see you in the field."

"Oh." Izuku says, because there's nothing more he can say to that. "Wow. O-okay."

"Well, then!" All-Might brings his hands together. "If that's settled, then I won't take up any more of your time. Thank you again, young Togata."

"Always a pleasure, sir."

Togata stands, with Izuku only a beat behind. Excitement buzzes in his veins like Full Cowl, and he has to tamp down on it a little. He's only going to meet with Nighteye, he reminds himself. There's no guarantee he'll get an internship, but still—

Togata turns to leave, pauses, and seems to change his mind. "All-Might," he says, turning back. There's a cautious note in his voice that Izuku hasn't heard before. "Could I ask a personal question? You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

All-Might blinks, looking taken off guard by how bare and blunt the request is. "Er, what is it?"

"Well, I was wondering if… I mean, is there a reason why you

couldn't make this introduction yourself? I'm happy to help," he adds quickly. "Really, I am! But, you've spoken recently, haven't you? So…"

"I… I'm not sure if that's a good idea." A wry smile crosses All-Might's face. "Keep in mind the purpose would be to *convince* Nighteye to take Midoriya on, so…"

Togata returns the smile, almost. "Right. I… see."

"We do have things to discuss, Nighteye and I," All-Might says quietly. "But not this. Not… yet. Complications to overcome, that sort of thing."

Togata nods. "He misses you, you know."

All-Might goes still. Izuku's heart leaps to throat level.

"I mean, I know he probably hasn't said it," Togata goes on. "He doesn't—I mean he has trouble with—well, you probably know that better than I do. But he does. I can tell. If you wanted to talk to him, I don't think he'd say no."

All-Might is silent for a while, hands folded tightly in front of him. "Thank you, young Togata," he says. "Don't let me keep you any longer, now."

"Of course. Thank you. And I look forward to introducing Midoriya." He gives Izuku another smile and a nod, and walks out.

"*Oh my God*," Nana says once he's gone, for all that Izuku's the only one who can hear her. "I can see *exactly* why Nighteye tried to throw him at you, Toshi."

"Satisfy my curiosity on something, will you?" Togata says.

There's a train ride between UA and Nighteye's agency, and Izuku would be lying if he said Togata wasn't fun to talk to. It helps a lot with his nerves, because his nervousness over meeting Gran Torino was almost nothing compared to this. He can always use the distraction. Rei's here, but sometimes Rei isn't quite enough.

"Sure," he says. His hands are shoved into his pockets to quell the trembling. He might feel better if he had his costume, but Togata had advised him not to bother bringing it. It was only an introduction,

after all.

“How *did* you keep track of me, during that demonstration?” Togata asks. “It was a decent strategy in and of itself; you were expending way less energy just dodging, and if I hadn’t changed tactics on you, you would have worn me down in minutes. How’d you manage to predict me?”

Izuku chews on his lower lip as he ponders the answer. The truth is this: he kept his eyes on Rei. She’s enough of an empath to be able to feel where people are, and she can phase through floors just as well as Togata can. Between those two skills, she was able to stay on him and make herself visible to Izuku at floor level, so that Izuku could continue dancing out of Togata’s range.

Not that he can tell Togata any of that.

So instead, he lifts an eyebrow at the older student and says, “Now that would be telling.”

Togata narrows his eyes with a lopsided grin. “It’s only practical. Clearly there’s a hole in my strategy that needs filling.”

There really isn’t, and Izuku would love to tell him that but he’s not sure how to justify that statement.

“I mean, it’s clearly nothing to do with your quirk,” Togata continues. “Yours is a standard strength enhancer, nothing to do with increased awareness or perception. So it’s some kind of skill, isn’t it? Which means it’s something anyone can learn, including villains.” He digs Izuku in the ribs with a gentle elbow. “Throw me a bone, Midoriya. I know there’s always room for improvement, for myself especially.”

Izuku purses his lips and decides to take a risk. “That’s a pretty big assumption, isn’t it? That it’s nothing to do with my quirk?” He pauses. “I can tell you with one hundred percent certainty that it’s not a skill that just anyone can learn. In fact, as far as I know, it’s not a skill that *anyone* can learn, at all.”

“So it’s all to do with your quirk, then.”

That, and acquiring the cooperation of a murdered empath who loves mischief, Izuku thinks. “Pretty much,” he says.

“How, then?” Togata presses. “How does strength and agility enhancement translate to predicting my moves? Unless it’s a general

enhancer that includes perception as well? That seems a bit broad, for a quirk."

Izuku nods absently. "That's one way of putting it."

"How else would you put it?"

"It works by increasing my levels of updog."

"Midoriya."

"Yes?" Izuku tries for a wide-eyed innocent look. Rei rolls her eyes.

"You're avoiding the question," Togata says.

Izuku smiles thinly. "What gave you that idea?" Togata gives him a thoroughly unimpressed look, and Izuku sighs. Distracting Togata isn't going to work, apparently. "Look, my quirk's kind of complicated, and a big part of its effectiveness is that most people don't know the full extent of how it works and what it can do. But I can *promise* you that no one else has anything like it." His throat goes tight for a moment. "Believe me, I've looked."

Togata doesn't look quite convinced by this, but he's apparently willing to shelve the conversation for later, because he doesn't press further. This may also be because they reach their stop soon after.

"So, um…" Izuku braces himself, hoping his evasiveness won't have discouraged Togata from being forthcoming himself. "Any, uh, advice?"

To his relief, Togata grins at him again. "You seem like you have a sense of humor."

"I mean, yes?"

"He likes that in heroes. I'd open with a joke, if I were you. Make him laugh and you'll be on his good side in an instant."

Immediately the knot in Izuku's chest starts to loosen. So Nighteye's *that* kind of hero. The kind that goes for levity. *Obviously.* Anyone who works with All-Might has to know how to smile.

"Okay, cool," he says, half to himself. "I can do that. I can definitely do that."

I definitely can't do this, Izuku fingerspells at Rei.

Part of him is wondering if Togata was hazing him with that advice. One look at Nighteye is enough to tell him that he could probably give Aizawa-sensei a run for his money in being a strict, no-nonsense taskmaster. They'd walked in to find him taking a hapless sidekick to task over… something? The tone and manner of a report? He's still not quite sure, and the look that the hero is currently giving him doesn't exactly encourage him to ask.

If there's one comforting thing about this situation, it's the fact that Nighteye's office, as immaculately neat as it is, isabsolutely lined with All-Might merchandise. The clear evidence of common ground is reason enough to hope that this won't go as poorly as the look on Nighteye's face suggests it will.

Sir Nighteye sits behind his desk, brows knitted together as he watched Izuku over his folded hands. He's a tall man, and the fact that he's sitting down doesn't diminish that. All-Might had said they were opposites as heroes, and it shows; he's not nearly as thin as All-Might is now, but he's slender and angular, with a thin, severe face and glasses balanced on a tall nose. He's very crisply dressed in a gray suit; the only splashes of color to him are a red polka-dotted tie and his hair, which is dark green with a few streaks of bright yellow.

In Izuku's mind, he looks more like an accountant than a pro hero, but he supposes that he's the last person who should comment on deceiving appearances.

Here's the thing, though. Izuku doesn't find fault in any of that, not even the humorless expression on a man who supposedly appreciates a good joke. But Izuku has spent his whole life talking to ghosts, gauging possible bullies, and dodging teachers who saw him as more of a problem than a pupil, and he'd like to think it's given him a decent read on people in general. At the very least, he can recognize when people are determined to dislike him.

What makes him so uncomfortable now is that Nighteye's looking at him the same way a lot of his old teachers used to look at him, when they'd known him long enough to decide to write him off.

"So," All-Might's former partner says. "Midoriya Izuku. You wish to intern with me. I have to say I'm surprised; I'm not usually renowned enough to be sought out, especially by a first year student."

Izuku stares at him, wondering how to respond to that with Togata

still in the room. Just as he's sure that Nighteye dislikes him on sight, there is no doubt in his mind that the man knows exactly who he is. He resists the urge to look to Togata for support, because the last thing he needs right now is to show shaky resolve.

Make him laugh, Togata had said. Izuku has literally no other cards to play until he can speak with Nighteye alone.

"I mean, it's definitely Plan A," he says, and prays that Nighteye takes the bait.

A single yellow eyebrow rises. "I suppose that begs the question of what Plan B is."

"One of my friends cancels gravity," Izukuanswers. "I figure if all else fails, I can just high-five her and launch myself straight into the sun."

He can almost *hear* the crickets.

A moment passes before he leans over and mutters to Togata out of the corner of his mouth. "*I thought you said to open with a joke.*"

Togata leans back. "*I think we have very different ideas of what constitutes a joke.*"

Rei snickers.

"In any case," Nighteye continues, as if Izuku hadn't spoken at all. "I don't open my doors to just anyone. I have both a job to do and a reputation to maintain, and I will *not* offer a chance to any who have not proven themselves worthy of it." There's a strange emphasis on those words that has the hairs on the back of Izuku's neck prickling. "An internship is an opportunity, and not all heroes in training deserve them. So, tell me, Midoriya—what makes you deserving of the opportunity that this would present? What can you offer my agency?"

"Well if I work for you, you won't have to pay me for it," Izuku answers before he can think better of it.

Nighteye's face doesn't change, except for a slight deepening in the creasesbetween his eyebrows.

Izuku turns to Togata. "See? I did it again."

Togata sighs a little. "Sir, please just hear him out? Remember that demonstration I told you about? He held out against me longer than

the rest of his classmates. All-Might recommends him, too."

"Quite impressive, I'm sure," Nighteye replies, and Izuku doesn't miss how his voice softens when he talks to Togata. "Though, All-Might is not often known for—"

"Sir, look," Izuku breaks in, before Nighteye can finish the thought. "I think we both know how I ended up here. Right?"

Nighteye falls silent for a moment, meeting Izuku's eyes once more. Finally he lets out a short sigh and sits up straighter. "Mirio?"

"Yes, Sir?"

"I'd like a moment alone with him, please?"

"Oh, right, sure." Togata stands up, giving Izuku an encouraging pat on the shoulder before he leaves the room and shuts the door behind him.

Izuku waits a moment or two before taking a deep breath. "Okay, so —"

A yelp of static makes him turn. It's Rei, standing at the door where Togata just left, pointing. *He's still outside and he's got his ear to the door,* she says.

"Senpai, you have to actually leave," he calls, raising his voice to be heard through the closed door.

There's a moment of silence, then the sound of footsteps retreating. Rei gives him a thumbs-up.

Izuku turns back to Nighteye. "Does he know that you wanted him to inherit One For All?"

Nighteye, who looks like he was about to say something, stops in his tracks. His severe expression breaks into surprise, and it takes him a moment to school it back into something more controlled.

"He does not," he replies quietly. "And I would prefer to keep it that way, since it's no longer in the cards."

"I mean…" Izuku hesitates. "Was… was it? At some point?" Nighteye's sharp gaze zeroes in on him. "You're the only one who would know."

"I don't use my quirk that way." Nighteye's voice is sharp and cold.

“Not anymore. And certainly not on Mirio.” He studies Izuku for a moment longer, then stands up with his hands pressed to the desk surface. “You seem determined to get straight to the point. So I’ll afford you the same courtesy. I do not and have never approved of All-Might’s decision in choosing you. He acted in haste, with his judgment clouded by his sympathy for your quirklessness, and I have yet to find any evidence to the contrary.” He fixes Izuku with a flat look, unaware of the snarl building from Rei. “If you came looking for my help, or myacknowledgment as All-Might’s successor, then I’m afraid I’ll have to disappoint you.”

Izuku feels cold. It’s not a chill up his spine, or shaking in his limbs, or fear. He feels detached, as if Nighteye’s words have pressed until all the feeling has been pushed out of him. Everything’s at a distance. He doesn’t tremble. He sits stock-still in the chair before the desk, feet planted on the floor under him, fingers digging slightly into his pant legs.

“I’m not here about One For All,” he says. “And I’m not here because you know All-Might. That’s just how I found you.”

“Why, then, are you here?” Nighteye’s voice is composed, at least on surface level, but Rei’s still hissing like a chorus of snakes so that probably doesn’t mean much.

“A lot of reasons,” Izuku says, forcing himself to relax a little. He can’t just lose his temper and storm out, or say something that will drive Nighteye to toss him out. As much as Nighteye is grating on him, he *does* want this. It’s just the first day; Nighteye doesn’t know him, and there’s plenty of time for things to turn around. “You’re really well known for whipping heroes into shape, for one thing. And Togata-senpai says you’re a good teacher. And ever since—since Kamino there are things I’ve been wanting to learn. I got out of that because I was lucky, and because people helped me and made sacrifices to save me. I don’t ever want to feel that helpless again.”

“All valid reasons,” Nighteye concedes after a moment. “Which brings me back to my earlier question. What can *you* offer my agency? Keep in mind that your possession of One For All is not a qualification.”

Izuku nods, pursing his lips. “I’m pretty good with people,” he says. “I mean, in both ways. I’m good with strategy, and cooperation, but I’m also sort of good with—with villains. Against villains, I mean. I know how to talk to people, and read people, and make them feel a certain way, sometimes.” He bites his lip for a moment. “I’ve been told I’m

manipulative. It makes it easier for me to find openings in a fight."

"I see. In that case…" Nighteye neatens a few things on his desk, until the only thing that sits in the center is a single form and a stamp. "Let's put that to the test, then. This is an internship registration form. It's been filled out already—the only thing left is this approval stamp." He meets Izuku's eyes. "I will not stamp this paper. If you want an internship with my agency, you must do it yourself."

"I take it you're going to stop me if I try," Izuku says.

Nighteye doesn't answer, except for a slight raise of his eyebrows. Izuku takes that as his invitation to get started.

He calls his bluff first, steps forward and reaches for the stamp. In all of two moves, he's flying into the opposite wall, narrowly missing a few decorative wall hangings with All-Might's face. He manages to twist around so that he hits the wall feet first, bending his knees to absorb the shock and launch himself right back toward the desk. His grasp on One For All is up to ten percent from pure, single-minded grinding, and he hopes that's enough.

Except, it's not. His bare wrist aches from where Nighteye gripped him to turn him away the first time, and All-Might said that Nighteye's quirk is activated by touch. He's not sure what Nighteye meant when he said he didn't use his quirk "that way" anymore, but he has to assume that the hero knows what his next moves will be.

And it shows; no matter what Izuku tries, Nighteye has a counterattack ready and waiting for him. Every angle, every maneuver he knows, Nighteye sees coming and foils effortlessly. All-Might had said Nighteye was the brains, but he has plenty of strength as well. It's hard to judge his build under that suit, but Nighteye is strong enough to fend him off with ease. Not even his more underhanded moves work; he aims for the kidneys and narrowly avoids a sprained wrist for his troubles.

"Is that all you have to offer?" Nighteye asks when Izuku stops to catch his breath. "Brute strength and underhanded tactics? You may have learned a few tricks from Gran Torino, but it's useless if you can't execute them properly against an opponent. You claimed to be a strategist—have you run out of maneuvers already?"

Izuku gets to his feet again, winded and sore. "I guess I do have one left."

Still at the desk, Nighteye guards the form and barely braces himself for Izuku's next move.

Izuku hesitates, clearing his throat quietly. "...Could I have the stamp, please?"

The hero gapes at him, apparently speechless.

"Well, it was worth a shot," Izuku says with a shrug.

"Is this a game to you?" Nighteye's voice is low and dangerous. "I knew you'd be brash, foolhardy, and poorly prepared, but the fact that you're arrogant as well only strengthens my previous convictions."

That stings. Rei shrieks in fury and takes a swing at him, but her hands pass through him harmlessly. She turns to Izuku, furious and frustrated. *Let me help!* Her signs are sharp and jerky with anger. *He doesn't get to talk to you like that!*

Izuku looks from Rei to the form. He'd been fibbing before; there is one more play. It's not a pretty one. It's not one he's fond of, or one he's eager to put into action. Nighteye's not a villain nor an enemy; he's a hero, he's a former friend of All-Might's, and the thought of playing this card against him leaves a bad taste in Izuku's mouth.

But Nighteye is also *wrong.* Izuku knows that, has no doubts about it. And if Nighteye is going to help him the way Izuku hopes he can, then Izuku's going to have to show him what he's capable of—*all* of what he's capable of. And so, finger-spelling instructions to Rei, Izuku does what he does best.

He lies.

"This is stupid." It comes out caustic, sharp with frustration. "This is stupid and a waste of my time."

"It's easy to belittle what you can't have," Nighteye tells him.

"No, not the internship," Izuku shoots back. "This. You. Where do *you* get off calling *me* arrogant?" He's a good distance away from the desk, but he shifts back and hopes Nighteye doesn't notice. "You've been high and mighty since I walked in. Thinking that I came here for *your* acknowledgment." His eyes feel hot; Rei's presence nearby, and the fact that there's some truth to what he's saying, give him extra nerve. "Or that you have any say in who gets One For All."

The lines between Nighteye's eyebrows deepen again.

"I mean, Gran Torino spent half a week making me taste the floorboards," Izuku says. "He *taught* All-Might, and All-Might was so scared of him he couldn't speak in a straight line when he told me about him. But he never called me unworthy, and he never tried to tell All-Might what to do with *his* power. And you think you get to throw a fit when All-Might chooses somebody without asking *your* permission? Who do you think you are?"

"You know nothing of this," Nighteye says coldly, and for the first time he starts to look truly angry. "I never steered him wrong, I *always* had his best interests at heart, on and off the battlefield! He trusted my judgment for years, and yet now when his decisions are their most crucial, he casts them aside like they mean nothing."

Izuku swallows his own disgust and bites out, "Well maybe you should've thought of that before you abandoned him when he needed you."

Nighteye freezes. For a few seconds, silence falls like a sledgehammer.

"What did you just say."

"All-Might told me what you saw," Izuku says. "And you—what? Got mad when he didn't want to get coddled? Is that why you're mad about me? Because he's not doing what *you* wanted anymore?"

"Midoriya." Nighteye's knuckles are stark white, fingernails digging into the wooden desktop.

"No? Not mad? Just scared then." An epiphany strikes. "Is that why you don't use your quirk 'that way' anymore? Because you're scared of what you'll see?" He hates himself just a little for saying that, but it's out and there's no swallowing it back now.

"What would you know?" Nighteye bites out. "How would a selfish child like you understand what it means to know the shape of fate and be powerless to stop it? Everything I ever did was to help him—"

"How, by making him accept his own death? Because that's what you did! He told me!"

"It was to protect him!" There's pure rage and pain on Nighteye's face, but Izuku keeps going. The words taste foul in his mouth, but he keeps saying them because it's working, bit by bit.

“Protect him?” he spits out. “You abandoned him! Things went wrong, and instead of looking for a solution, you ran off so you wouldn’t have to watch it happen!”

“*There was no solution,*” Nighteye seethes. “I offered one, and he refused to listen.”

“You’re a coward!” Izuku yells. “You’re a *coward*, and it’s no wonder he never talked about you—”

He hits the ground hard enough to see stars. The back of his head throbs from striking the floor, and the impact of his back to the too-thin carpet almost knocks the wind out of him again. He can’t get up; Nighteye has him pinned to the ground. He’s not just strong; he’s fast, too fast for Izuku to have avoided him.

Nighteye’s voice is icily calm, “Have you anything else to say, without speaking so carelessly about things you don’t understand?”

Izuku looks to the desk, then back to Nighteye’s face. “When do I start?”

Above him, Nighteye freezes. Slowly, without releasing Izuku, he turns and looks back.

Rei sits on the edge of the desk, legs swinging. The ink on the paper is freshly wet, and she plays with the stamp between her fingers. To Nighteye, it must look like the stamp is floating in the air on its own. When she sees him looking, she holds it out and drops it carelessly to the floor.

There’s a moment of shocked silence before Nighteye lets him up and returns to the desk. He retrieves the dropped stamp, picks up the now completed form, and inspects the neat red “Approved” glistening on the paper. After a moment, he turns back to Izuku.

“I didn’t mean any of that,” Izuku says. It’s true, and he knows it’s true, but it sounds hollow. Nighteye goes back to inspecting the form. “About you, and about All-Might. I didn’t mean that. It’s like I said, I’m good at—with people. I was just trying to—”

“Get out.”

“I don’t think you’re a coward—”

“I will speak with you later,” Nighteye says. “Concerning the specifics

of your internship. But for now, get out.”

Izuku flees.

Chapter End Notes

CW: discussion of past deaths of ghosts, including abuse and murder, mentions of past trauma, manipulation, purposeful provocation.

Chapter 50

Chapter Notes

ART

jayyefire

ravenclawoutcast13

blog-the-star-child-arts

dekusleftsneaker

As always, this story has a TV Tropes page!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Shouto returns to the dorms after the first official day of remedial training, he's about ready to either fall over or take a three-hour shower.

It's a good sort of feeling, though. Since high school started he's trained in plenty of places, under plenty of people. The change from Endeavor's idea of training to UA's was jarring, and he's assumed that every shift from one set of teachers to another would take just as much adjusting. But as time has gone on, every place he's trained that isn't with UA or Endeavor has been more like UA than Endeavor, so he's been forced to conclude that his father's an outlier as well as a bastard. Without him, training leaves Shouto feeling exhausted, but not wrung out or angry or used. The ache in his muscles is satisfying, not debilitating.

"Whoa, check out Todoroki's face!"

"Awww man, so much for the class pretty boy!"

He weathers the teasing as he rests his eyes on the common room couch. His focus wavered at some point during training, and he wiped out and split his chin open on the concrete, which makes for an interesting face when combined with the usual bumps and bruises. He shrugs it off; Sero and Ashido's lighthearted ribbing doesn't damage his pride the way harsh ridicule does. It's certainly not enough to affect his—

“Bet Midoriya won’t mind.” It’s impossible to disguise those four words as a coughing fit, but Kaminari still makes the attempt.

Shouto’s good mood wavers. Nearby, Iida and Uraraka are close enough to see him pull a face, and both of them wince in sympathy. Iida rounds on Kaminari to scold him for making invasive comments and circulating false gossip. In the confusion, Shouto slips out and heads to the kitchen.

Ojiro is there, humming over a mug of tea as he waits for it to cool. “Oh hey, Todoroki,” he says. “Training go well?”

“Went fine,” Shouto answers. He goes to the fridge and sighs with relief when he sees that his leftovers are still there. Kirishima got mixed up and accidentally ate his the other day; that had been disappointing enough without having to awkwardly brush off Kirishima’s soulful remorse.

“Your face begs to differ.” His classmate grins impishly. “They’re really working you and Bakugou hard, aren’t they? It’s been a while since I saw you guys this beat up from training.”

Shouto shrugs. “Not like I don’t need it.”

They stand in companionable silence for a few minutes. Shouto isn’t friends with everyone in class, not like Kaminari and Ashido are. But even outside of his group of close friends, there are a few whose company he doesn’t mind. Ojiro is one of them; he’s friendly but not overbearingly so, and it makes him easy to be around.

“Speaking of which,” Ojiro speaks up eventually. “Remember, uh, study group? That thing we did before summer started?”

Shouto finishes his mouthful before replying. “What about it?”

“Well, I was talking to Yaoyorozu earlier, and we were thinking of starting it up again,” Ojiro says. “Iida was refining the rules, after what happened last time—”

“After Bakugou took things too far again?” Shouto says acidly.

“R-right,” Ojiro says awkwardly. “Yaoyorozu said they’d run things by Aizawa to see if he had any advice. But anyway, I just… it feels like it’d be a good idea to give it another try, you know? We do a lot of rescue exercises and battle simulations, stuff like that, but I feel like we could do more sparring. I don’t wanna get rusty, you know? And…

well, you and Bakugou are off getting outside training, and a few of the others are looking into internships, so I'm pretty sure there's more we could all bring to the table."

Shouto grunts noncommittally.

"You're not really a fan of Bakugou, are you?" Ojiro asks.

Shouto's mouth tightens. He's never really been a "fan" of Bakugou. He respected him as a strong opponent and combatant, but he's never liked him. And now, with recent revelations, he can hardly talk about him without his mood taking a turn for the worst.

"I think he's sort of mellowed out," Ojiro goes on, a little cautiously. "Since Kamino. I mean, what happened there was terrible, and he shouldn't have had to go through that—neither of them should have—but he's been different ever since. He's been more careful. Have you noticed that?"

"I guess," Shouto says grudgingly. If he thinks about it—really thinks about it—he can't imagine Bakugou throttling Midoriya in a headlock and spitting venom at him the way he once did. But Midoriya's cautious around him, for a damn good set of reasons, and anyone that makes Midoriya that tense has Shouto's instant dislike. "Why're you telling me this?"

"Well… we messed up a lot, last time," Ojiro says. "We did a lot of things wrong—I mean the first thing was inviting ourselves without asking, and that was pretty uncool. Sorry about that." He pauses. "You think Midoriya would be up for it?"

"Why're you asking me?"

"Because Bakugou's not the only one who's been different since Kamino, and I think you know that," Ojiro says bluntly.

Shouto stares at him.

"Look, I don't put any stock in dumb rumors and gossip," Ojiro goes on. "But I know he trusts you more than pretty much anybody else. Except maybe Uraraka and *maybe* Iida, But I'm pretty sure it's you. And since this kind of started with you two sparring together, if anyone should bring this up to him, it'd probably be you." He pauses. "Also he's been in a weird mood today. I think he went out to apply for an internship, and he's been kind of off ever since he got back."

His food is finished. Shouto nods his thanks to Ojiro, puts the dishes away, and goes upstairs.

Midoriya's door is unlocked, and Shouto knocks twice before letting himself in. To his relief, his friend is there, which means he doesn't have to go looking for him. An unnatural chill settles over him as he steps in; once upon a time he would have ignored it as a trick of his imagination, but now he suspects it might be dead people. The thought should be weirder to him, but somehow it isn't.

Midoriya glances up from the textbook he's staring at, blinking owlishly. Mika climbs out of his lap and jumps down from the bed, trilling softly as she slides back and forth past Shouto's feet.

His friend's hands flick out. Shouto's gotten better at sign language; he's been studying books and online videos, and he always tries to find at least some time each day to practice with Midoriya. He's always been good at building muscle memory and learning through physical movements; Yaoyorozu says he's a kinesthetic learner.

You look like you got hit by a train, Midoriya tells him.

"Thanks ever so," Shouto says dryly. "Did I miss anything important today?"

Midoriya shrugs. "I'm the wrong person to ask, I was gone for about half the day."

"Internship?"

Midoriya's face falls. Then the rest of him does, flopping back onto his pillow with a groan.

Ojiro was right, apparently. Shouto scoops up Mika and deposits her on Midoriya's chest. "What happened?"

"I think I sabotaged myself."

"Did you not get it?" Shouto asks, sitting down next to him. Mika yowls insistently, stretching her paws to grasp at him, and he scoots closer so she can properly drape herself across both of them.

"I… think I did, actually? Like he wanted to, to test me, and I technically passed it, but…" Midoriya's face crumples. "I think I made him hate me in the process. Or he already kind of hated me, and I gave him more reasons to."

Shouto shrugs. “Why would you want to intern with him, then? You’ve got All-Might in your corner; I’m sure he’d be happy to break out his connections for you. Intern somewhere else.”

“I can’t. It has to be him.”

“Why?”

“Because I think, out of everyone who has any chance of saying yes, he’s the one who can help me,” Midoriya replies. “I think he’s the best one to understand what I need.”

“Will he give you what you need, if he hates you?” Shouto asks.

“M-maybe? Maybe hate is a strong word? I just…” Midoriya cuts himself off with a sigh.

“What hero is it?” Shouto asks. “And what’d you do to make him—angry with you?”

“It’s Sir Nighteye. Remember Togata-senpai? He’s the one Togata’s been interning with.” Shouto’s eyebrows rise. That’s not surprising; Shouto has seen their upperclassman wave to Midoriya during passing periods. “And as for what I did… look, do you remember the Sports Festival?”

His heart sinks. “…Yes?” Shouto averts his eyes, so they won’t linger for too long on Midoriya’s left eye.

“Remember that… that stuff I said to you?”

As if he could ever forget. “Do you mean when you told me my power was my own, or when you said ‘fuck?’”

“Look, I said a lot of things!” Midoriya slings one arm over his eyes. “I said a bunch of things, and half of them I didn’t really mean because I was angry and I was trying to throw you off. Like… like throwing the recommendation thing in your face. I still feel really embarrassed whenever I think about that.”

“I mean… I did get in on recommendation,” Shouto points out.

“Yeah, but you didn’t *ask* for it, and you couldn’t control that, and you’ve never held it over the rest of us. Did you even want it in the first place?”

“No,” Shouto says sourly. Given the choice, he would have taken the

entrance exam and earned his place in UA on his own merit. But no, the old man just had to make him special. It's a sore point and it always has been; that's why when Midoriya threw it in his face during their match, he…

He'd—

"You see?" Midoriya says, voice muffled by the arm over his face. "It made you feel like crap for something that wasn't even your fault. And… and that was kind of what I was *trying* to do, because back then you were right about being stronger than me, and I was pretty much out of bones I could break so there was no other way to get one over on you."

"It's a legitimate strategy," Shouto points out.

"Not *always*."

He can tell where this is headed—Midoriya has a hero complex you could land a jet on. The purring one-eyed cat lying half in his lap and half on Midoriya is proof of that, now that he knows how his friend got her in the first place. For someone who brings out under-handed tactics whenever he's backed into a corner, Midoriya's kind of a bleeding heart.

"You said you weren't sorry for using it at Kamino," he says quietly. Midoriya stiffens for a moment, then relaxes again.

"That's different. That's against villains."

"Why'd you do it today?" Shouto asks. Technically Midoriya hasn't said he did, but contrary to what his classmates seem to think sometimes, Shouto can read between lines.

"A lot of reasons," Midoriya says. "But I guess… strength wasn't going to work. I wasn't going to win if I just pushed myself harder. And he wasn't—he wasn't seeing *me*. I wasn't what he wanted, and he wouldn't stop seeing what he wanted and comparing, so I just wanted to wanted him to see what I actually was, even if…"

"Even if it was ugly?" Shouto finishes for him.

"It was like he'd already decided what I was, and what he thought of me, before I'd even walked in," Midoriya says softly, and doesn't seem to notice the painful little pang it causes in Shouto's chest.

“Can’t imagine how that feels,” Shouto says quietly.

It takes a moment for the irony to register. “Oh,” Midoriya says. “Right.”

“Yeah.”

More silence passes. It’s easy for that to happen, when there’s a cat within reach.

“So what are you going to do from here?” Shouto asks. “Look for another internship, or try to salvage this one?”

“Either way, I passed his test,” Midoriya says. “And he said he’d call me in again to discuss my internship. So I guess… I’ll go in, apologize, and see what happens.”

“You’re my best friend,” Shouto says.

Midoriya twitches. “Uh, yeah? You’re… you too.” There’s some hesitance to it, which Shouto understands. ‘Best friend’ still seems wrong somehow, too shallow, not enough.

“I didn’t like you very much when we first talked,” Shouto continues. “And what you said hurt, sort of. But a lot of it was sort of right. And now you’re my best friend. So… maybe there’s hope.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“You grow on people. I don’t think Aizawa-sensei liked you very much at first, either.”

“Haha, thanks.”

“Are you going to tell this Nighteye?” Shouto asks. “About the ghosts?”

Midoriya looks back at him, then at another spot in the room that is empty to Shouto’s eyes. “Yeah,” he says. “I am.” He looks to Shouto again. “Did you come up here just to check on me, or was there something you wanted to talk about?”

Shouto thinks of what Ojiro says, then looks at Midoriya’s tired face and decides it can wait. But… “We should spar again,” he says. “It’s been too long. Do you have time right now?”

Midoriya blinks up at him, brightening. “Yeah,” he says. “Yeah, I got

time.”

Because there’s no getting around it, Nighteye calls the boy in for the next free slot in his schedule.

And there *is* no getting around it; truthfully he had planned on taking him on as an intern regardless of the results of his “test”, but now he can’t refuse him even if he wants to. He set his terms, and Midoriya Izuku met them.

He gives himself a day to wrest himself back under his own rigid control, until he stops tasting bile in the back of his throat and the crawling beneath his skin recedes to a more acceptable level. It helps that a full day means that he no longer has the boy’s future pressing behind his eyes, demanding to be seen—he only looked carefully the day before, peering ahead moment by moment so that he could foresee each maneuver before they happened.

He’s still bracing himself, not sure how Midoriya’s voice will affect him now, when he last heard it echoing his own thoughts. Before the boy walked into his office, no one dared call Nighteye a coward but the voices in his own head.

He shakes himself, half-embarrassed at the thought. He can remain professional; a few slung barbs will not change that. The boy copped to being a strategist and manipulator; Nighteye pushed him into a corner and demanded he prove his skills, and he did so. He might not like the boy much, but he isn’t foolish enough place all the blame on him when he only did exactly as Nighteye asked.

The boy knocks and waits for permission before entering. The door to Nighteye’s office swings gently open and Midoriya is barely stepping in, when a chill creeps up Nighteye’s spine and takes hold, clutching with many clawed fingers until his temples ache from gritting his teeth. He relaxes his jaw, but the unease remains, pulsing like a heartbeat as the taste of bile returns.

Midoriya looks much the same as he did yesterday, dressed in his school uniform with the tie poorly done and the lapel of his jacket crooked. The only difference is that the dark circles beneath his eyes may have deepened. The eyes themselves are too bright and unblinking, darting and flickering about the room. When they do settle on Nighteye’s face, they pierce a little too deep for his liking.

Everyone has a presence. Even the most nondescript, least interesting

people have a presence if you know how to look for it. Midoriya's sets his teeth on edge and tilts the very axis on which the room balances.

"I want to apologize," Midoriya says, before Nighteye can get a word out. "And, um. Clear things up. I meant what I said about you not having any say in who gets One For All." He doesn't flinch or falter when he says that. "But the rest of it wasn't—I didn't mean any of that. I was only saying it to get you angry enough to leave the desk." He takes a deep breath. "I don't like doing that, saying things that I know will hurt people, just to get them to do what I want. It's one thing if it's a villain, but with anyone else it leaves a bad taste in my mouth. It feels like bullying. So I'm sorry."

Nighteye raises his eyebrows. That's just odd—a boy apologizing to a grown man for bullying him. The boy even says *bullying* like a curse, like it's a filthy slur that he's ashamed to say. In the space of that single word, Nighteye catches a glimpse of what he saw on full display yesterday, when the boy spat out venomous words until Nighteye lost both his temper and the challenge he had set himself.

It's anger, plain and simple. The boy may claim that his words were false, but the anger was not. Even now, in a display of humility that Nighteye can judge to be genuine, the anger slips through so easily. Coupled with the unsettling air that he carries about him, it renews the crawling and the chills and the off-balance feeling that Nighteye endures stoically.

And that—above all else, that is why Nighteye knows he is right. This boy could be a hero on his own. Underground perhaps, with an air like that, with anger like that, with a head for strategy as ruthless as that. He could be formidable; he even has a quirk of his own—

(*and hadn't that stung to realize, that the boy who All-Might claimed as quirkless had a quirk after all, that after years of silence on both sides, in spite of his best efforts and an outstretched hand, All-Might still didn't trust him with so simple a truth*—)

But none of that matters when this boy cannot be what All-Might was. He cannot be what the world needs. What *One For All* needs.

"It's pointless to apologize," he says at length. "You proved the skill that you claimed, and you did as you were asked. As for your strategy…" He pauses. "You know the details of my quirk, then?"

"I asked All-Might, after he told me what you foresaw," Midoriya answers. "I wanted to know the details, to see if there was any way

around it. It wasn't—I didn't think I'd be using it against you. I didn't know you'd test me like that."

"It was effective," Nighteye concedes.

Putting aside the incapacitating effect of Midoriya's harsh words, the plan was so deceptively elaborate that Nighteye has to wonder if Midoriya even intended for it to work as well as it did. What he foresaw, in brief snatches, was this: Midoriya, giving up on the fight. Himself, overpowering the boy. The boy fleeing, as if in defeat. Its success hinged on the fact that Foresight is purely visual.

Ingenious.

"You used the limits of my quirk to hide your victory from me," he says. "And to hide your quirk, as well."

Midoriya's throat bobs as he swallows. "Yes," he says.

"Some form of telekinesis, I assume? Or gravity manipulation, perhaps?"

The boy stares at him for a moment longer. The anger is gone from his eyes, replaced with a hollow look that seems to deepen the dark circles beneath them. "No."

"Your quirk was never in public record," Nighteye continues. "Before you started high school, when I assume you gained One For All, you were listed as quirkless. Why was this?"

"They called it—an invisible quirk," Izuku says. "But that's not—that's not totally true? It's not that it was useless, or obscure, or that I didn't know how to activate it. It was just easy to hide. It was so easy to hide that I'm not sure people would've believed me even if I didn't try to hide it, but—this—" His hands curl into fists. "This is sort of one part of why I came here, to you. Because—All-Might trusted you, with One For All. And you have a quirk that you keep secret, because it works best when people don't know what it is, so…" He braces himself and meets Nighteye's eyes again. "I see ghosts. Dead people who haven't left yet. And I think I make them… more present, I guess? Just by being around them. And when I got One For All, that sort of got stronger. I can let them move things now, and appear. That's what happened yesterday."

Since the day before, there has been a knot in his chest, heavy and festering like a mass of necrosis lodged in his ribcage. With this

knowledge, it begins to loosen.

Such a quirk is unheard of, obviously. The existence of an afterlife can neither be proven nor disproven. But if this is what the boy's quirk is, or at least an approximation of it, then… he can understand. It might sting, but…

"Also, um, All-Might told you I was quirkless, right?"

Nighteye nods. "It makes sense now that he would keep such a thing quiet," he admits.

"Oh, he didn't," Midoriya says. "I mean, he wasn't. I only told him recently."

Nighteye goes cold. "…Recently."

"After—after Kamino. After I…" His voice trails off. "So he wasn't lying to you. If he talked to you before then, he only told you I was quirkless because he didn't know. He didn't mean to be dishonest."

He didn't know.

He didn't know.

Something so basic, so fundamental, and All-Might didn't know because this boy—

Nighteye shuts his eyes, breathing through his nose as quietly as he can. He recognizes the sensation crawling up his throat, for all that it's been years since he let himself feel it for All-Might. Not bile this time, but anger. Protective anger, at that—and he knows it's absurd to look at this hollow-eyed teenager and feel protective of the Symbol of Peace, but that's about where he is now.

It's such a mess. The pillar is gone, with the world scrambling to build a new one on the way down. One For All is in the hands of a boy who bares his teeth instead of smiling, who bleeds fear and anger and unease instead of reassurance. A boy who inherited it on a lie.

And Nighteye wants to help. He's *desperate* to help, but All-Might has made quite clear what he thinks of Nighteye's "help". The proof of that is standing in front of him, watching him with probing, unsettling eyes.

And then those eyes blink and look past him, as the boy draws in a

sharp breath and swears fluently.

This conversation is awkward. It's unbearably, overwhelmingly awkward, and if Rei's empathic enough to feel half of how awkward it is then Izuku really can't blame her for acting out, but at the same time the last thing he needs is her *helping*. To make matters worse, she isn't Nighteye's biggest fan at the moment, so it's hard to tell if she's just lashing out or she's genuinely trying to break the ice.

Either way, he would prefer it if the ice were the only thing she broke.

He would've had to be blind to miss the merchandise lining Sir Nighteye's office. Figures, wall hangings, posters, and what looks like a small set of shelves lined with audio and video recordings of old interviews. Everything from cheap gachapon figurines to limited-edition collector's items.

The collection just so happens to include one of the limited-run New Year's snow globes that were only produced for the holiday season when Izuku was eight, which is unfortunately also the heaviest and most breakable object in the room. Rei zeroes in on it like she can *smell* the price-to-fragility ratio.

"*Rei no that's a collector's item*—" It takes One For All for Izuku to win a race against gravity and catch it before it hits the ground. His hands shake a little as he puts it back on the shelf. Give it a few decades, and collectors will sell their firstborns to get their hands on it. "You're not helping," he hisses.

Rei sticks her chin out stubbornly. *He's a butthead jerk and I don't like him.*

"I don't care if you don't like him, you can't just shove his breakables on the floor—"

Nighteye's still in the room. In hearing range. Watching him. Izuku stares back, mind blanking as it makes a wild leap for a possible excuse. It runs through a full list of options before he remembers belatedly that Nighteye's supposed to know about this—that he only just finished telling him. If anything, this can only be a good thing; it means there really is no backing out.

It's a good thing, he repeats to himself. It can only be a good thing.

He shoots a glare at Rei, who sticks her tongue out and blows a

raspberry only he can hear.

“Sorry about that,” he says to Nighteye, still standing by the shelf with the rescued snow globe. He’s been apologizing a lot. If he does it too much, it’ll probably stop sounding real. “I didn’t ask her to do that, I swear. She just gets bored easy. And she doesn’t like you. Not that that’s your fault, it’s pretty easy for her to not like people but—um.”

The problem is twofold: there is no right way to talk about this as far as Izuku can tell, and Nighteye is very, very hard to read. It’s one thing to open up to people like All-Might, Todoroki, Uraraka and Iida—people who know him and trust him, who he trusts in turn. But he’s just met Nighteye, and he isn’t sure where he stands with Nighteye but it can’t possibly be in his favor.

He has no choice but to lay it out plainly and hope for the best.

He returns to his original spot, holding Rei’s hand so she won’t be tempted to try a second time. Nighteye hasn’t stopped watching him and… he doesn’t seem too angry. Or irritated. Or skeptical, for that matter.

“Stuff like that sort of happens around me,” he explains. “Cold spots, swinging doors, weird noises, the usual stuff. Like I said, they get stronger if they’re around me long enough, and One For All’s made that worse. Or, better?” He remembers the question that Nighteye asked yesterday, the one he tried to answer with a joke. “I guess this is another thing I have that could help you. If I get them talking, they can tell me things. I can’t force them to do anything, but usually they like being helpful. It’s not like most of them have anything better to do, being what they are.”

He falls silent, hoping that’s enough of an offering. If Nighteye would just *say* something, this would be half as nerve-wracking.

Nighteye’s folded hands tighten for a moment, then go slack. “How many?” he asks.

“Ghosts?” Izuku says. “You mean… in this room, or in general? There’s just one in this room, but… I don’t know how many there are in all. It’s a lot. They’re everywhere.”

“How much of this does All-Might know?” Nighteye asks.

“He knows about my quirk, and how it works, and what it can do,” Izuku answers. “Some of the personal things, too. Like Rei.”

“Rei?” Nighteye’s brow furrows again.

“The one who just tried to knock over your New Years snow globe,” Izuku explains. “Would… would you like to see her? I can make it so you can see her, if you want.”

After a moment, Nighteye gives a single nod.

Izuku is careful only to press a drop of One For All into the hand he’s holding. A little goes a long way; the power spreads through her until Nighteye is opening his eyes wide and sitting up straight behind his desk. Rei, thankfully, doesn’t try to destroy any of his things. Or worse, attack him.

However, she does open her mouth wide and contort her face into something grotesque and… sort of melty. It’s bad enough visually without the high-pitched grating coming out of her throat, but Rei has never done anything in half-measures.

“That’s not helping,” Izuku tells her, and Rei proceeds to blow a raspberry with about nine tongues. “I’m really sorry, she’s just sort of like that.” The power lasts her less than a minute. She gestures rudely at Nighteye as it runs out, and Izuku only hopes she turned invisible before Nighteye could see it.

He’s standing up now. He looks thoughtful—good thoughtful or bad thoughtful, Izuku can’t tell.

“They’re not always like that,” he continues. “Loads of them are just like regular people. The worst they get is looking like they did when they died. Oh, that’s another thing I’m good at—I have a really strong stomach.”

Nighteye raises an eyebrow.

“It can get pretty bad,” Izuku says. “A lot of car accident victims. And… and villain attacks. Buildings falling on people, it’s not pretty. I mean, there’s this one ghost I know who was stabbed in the head. And the hole is just sort of… always there. Kind of leaking.” His voice trails off as he realizes belatedly that a raised eyebrow isn’t necessarily a request to elaborate. “You—you get used to it, after a while.”

“Is that so,” Nighteye says quietly. Before Izuku can ask what he means by that, he speaks again. “And this… Rei. Is she with you often?”

“She’s protective,” Izuku says. Beside him, Rei holds her chin high. “She was only nine when she died, but she’s been with me a long time.” He sees Nighteye’s face do the same complicated maneuver All-Might’s had when he first found out her age.

“What do you mean when you say they aren’t always like her? Is there something that sets her apart?”

Rei hisses at the question, letting go of Izuku’s hand to vanish from the room again. Izuku lets her go. He opens his mouth to reply, and pauses for a split second when the expected lump doesn’t form in his throat. His insides had tied themselves up in knots the first time he tried to say this out loud, and the tears had come so easily, but now the words fall from him without a fuss. “I only found this out recently,” he says. “She was part of All For One’s experiments, to figure out how to create the Noumu. She died decades ago, before they perfected it. But they tortured her, and it… did things to her. That’s how it is with all of them.”

“All of them?” Nighteye says sharply.

“The Noumu,” Izuku says. “The ones that didn’t survive. Their ghosts look like hers. It’s like what happened to them twisted them and… and traumatized them, I guess.” Another memory passes before his eyes, and he can feel his stomach crawling up his throat as he answers. “Haven’t seen them since Kamino. And after what they did to Dr. Tsubasa’s ghost, I’m not sure I want to.” He shakes his head. That’s enough sharing for now. Any more and he might do something truly embarrassing, like puke on Nighteye’s carpet.

He can do this, he thinks. He wants Nighteye’s help—maybe he even needs Nighteye’s help—but he can’t just ask for it, not after getting off on such a horribly wrong foot. No, if he’s going to win back Nighteye’s good will, if he’s going to *prove* himself to Nighteye, not as a holder of One For All but as Midoriya Izuku, then he’s going to have to be genuine. He’s going to have to give something first before he thinks about taking.

And right now, he thinks, the most valuable thing he has to offer is honesty.

A shudder passes through Nighteye as he listens, but he suppresses it.

The disconnect between what he hears and what he sees is jarring. The boy’s face is calm, and his voice is calm, and they shouldn’t be.

He's talking about death and torture and the murder, of damage that lasts beyond the boundary of life and death, and *no one* should speak so casually, so indifferently, about that kind of pain. No one should be that calm when they talk of villain's crimes. Of All For One's crimes.

You get used to it after a while.

That frightens him. More than the revelation of lingering dead, even more than how easily the successor of All-Might causes pain with nothing but words, *that frightens him*. That a boy this young, on the path to becoming a hero, carrying within him the most powerful quirk in existence and with it the hope for future peace and stability, can be numb to death and sorrow. That he can speak of the torture and murder of a child as if it means as much to him as the color of the sky.

His quirk might tell him what that means for the future—for both Midoriya's internship and the boy's future as a hero. The thought of what it might show him makes him sick with dread.

Chapter End Notes

CW: hostility from an authority figure.

Chapter 51

Chapter Notes

As always, this story has a TV Tropes page!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I start next week.” Izuku sounds a little proud of himself. “The internship’s going to last for a month. Apparently my timing was pretty good; his agency’s investigating an underground villain organization.” He pauses. “Not the League, though. A different one.”

If anything, that assurance only stirs Toshinori’s worries. Even if Izuku’s first real foray into hero work doesn’t pit him against the same criminals who tormented him over the past summer, it’s a reminder of what the world is becoming, now that All-Might is no longer playing his part. With no more pillar of justice to chase the criminals into the dark, they are beginning to reemerge.

“And… how are things?” he asks, placing his tea down for the umpteenth time in the past ten minutes. He folds his hands so he’ll leave it alone. “With Nighteye, I mean?”

“Awkward,” Izuku says bluntly. “Things are awkward with him. But, y’know, I kind of expected that, after what you told me.” He pauses, and to Toshinori’s alarm a look of *shame* crosses his face. “I mean… okay, so when I first met with him, he sort of tested my abilities. And I passed, but it wasn’t… nice.”

Toshinori purses his lips and frowns in confusion.

“I mean I… I got a bit…” Izuku flushes. “It was like a physical test, right? Of my abilities with One For All. But I ended up not really using One For All to do it. I, um… I used my words, and ghosts. And I don’t think he was expecting that.”

Toshinori’s heart plummets. “Do you mean that—that Nighteye has…?”
“Oh, no!” Izuku’s eyes widen. “No, I didn’t mean—he doesn’t have any ghosts. Rei helped me—just, here’s what happened. I drew him off so he wouldn’t see her slipping in. And the *way* I drew him off wasn’t…” He hesitates again, ducking his head. “I took him by surprise, and I don’t think he liked it.”

Toshinori's relief is uneasy. "That's… well, I suppose that's nothing new," he says at length. "For either of you." At Izuku's questioning look, he sighs a bit. "Nighteye has always been stubborn; I think it's probably natural for a man who sees the future to dislike surprises. As for you… well, it wouldn't be the first time you passed a test differently from the way you were expected to." He grimaces a little, wishing he hadn't reminded himself of the final exam. "I only hope it was as eye-opening for him as it was for me."

"Well, I talked to him again, and I think it went… better?" Izuku shrugs. "He accepted it, after all. And… I told him, about my quirk. So hopefully…" His voice trails off.

"Hopefully," Toshinori echoes.

"It's a work in progress," Izuku says. "And honestly? I think things are improving. And I'm pretty sure he can help me a lot." He pauses to study Toshinori's face. "So if you were worried, you don't have to be. I'm gonna be fine."

A knot of tension does loosen from between Toshinori's shoulders. "Good to hear it out loud," he admits. "There isn't too much to worry about—you'll be working with young Togata, won't you? He has a good head on his shoulders, from what I've seen and heard. He's not one of the 'Big Three' for nothing."

"I think everyone who has an internship got it through one of the 'big three'," Izuku says. "Uraraka and Tsuyu told me they're with Hadou-senpai under Ryukyu, and I know Kirishima followed Amajiki-senpai to work with Fatgum. Oh, wait, I forgot about Tokoyami… I don't remember what Tokoyami's doing."

"Ah, he's with Hawks," Toshinori says. "Your choices are all quite prestigious, for your first internships."

"I guess we didn't feel like dawdling," Izuku says. "Once I got my provisional license, I didn't want to waste time."

"Try not to drive yourself to a distraction before Monday, then," Toshinori tells him. "Nighteye has no patience for restless rookies who jump the gun."

He means it as a humorous little quip, but Izuku absorbs the advice with a solemn nod. "Anything else I should keep in mind?"

Surprise makes Toshinori cough, covering his mouth as the taste of

blood flecks his tongue. “I’m not sure I’m the right person to ask,” he rasps once it’s done. “It’s been six years since I last had his approval.”

“How long did you have it before then?” Izuku asks.

The blunt question doesn’t trigger another coughing fit, but Toshinori feels the pang all the same. He wants to say *years,* he wants to say *for the better part of my career*, but that simply isn’t true. There was a time when he thought it might be, but… “A little over five years,” he says at length. It strikes him like a hammer to the ribcage—they’ve been apart now for longer than they were partners.

“That’s still a long time,” Izuku says quietly. Toshinori wonders if the boy can read his thoughts on his face.

He nods, still wrestling with buried feelings and memories. “You’ve probably gathered as much already, but as I said, he’s stubborn,” he says. “Once he gets an idea into his head, it’s hard for him to let it go.”

“You’re telling me,” Izuku mutters.

In spite of himself, Toshinori cracks a little smile. “Be as plain as you can with him,” he says. “He has trouble reading people sometimes, so it’s best to make yourself as clear as possible. And he’s the most infuriatingly practical man I’ve ever met. He’s all logic and reason when he works a case.” He pauses then, frowning as he wonders if he should really speak so openly about this. “Just keep in mind… it affects him more than he lets on.”

“What?”

“His quirk. His visions.” Toshinori tears his eyes from his cup to look at Izuku again. “His work in general. He’d rather shoulder it himself and present a strong, professional front, but that’s what it is: a front. I think he might have picked up that habit from me.”

Something changes in his successor’s eyes. The thoughtful look turns hard and bright, hope and renewed determination mingling on his face. “I’ll keep it in mind,” he says. “Thanks, All-Might.”

“Good luck, my boy.”

After Izuku leaves, Toshinori makes his way back to his quarters, his fears put to rest. He knows it’s at least a little irrational to worry so. Izuku may be a handful, and he may be a lightning rod for trouble,

but it's not as if he's alone. He's surrounded by ghosts that Izuku assures him are friendly, Togata Mirio seems to have taken a liking to him, and…

And he's with Nighteye.

Heroics is a dangerous line of work; there are not a great many safe places for any hero to be. But under Nighteye's watch is the closest that Toshinori has ever known.

Nighteye has always been stubborn. It was his stubbornness that secured him a place at All-Might's right hand for almost six years. He holds onto his convictions. His good opinion, once lost, is nearly impossible to recover, and Toshinori doubts that he ever will.

But Nighteye is safe. There are few safer heroes that Izuku can work with.

He reaches his door and makes a beeline for the bathroom. Caught up in his own thoughts, he flicks the light switch and immediately reels back.

The bar of soap that usually sits by the sink is now on the floor, scored with deep grooves as if someone has been tearing at it. It's easy to see why, what with the message scrawled on the bathroom mirror in dried soap scum.

LITTLE BROTHER FIBBED. STUPID FOUR EYES IS BEING A BUTTHOLE.

BUT HE'S ALSO SAD.

T A L K T O H I M !!! MAKE HIM STOP BEING SAD AND MEAN !!!!

Doodled right next to the words is what looks like a childish drawing of a pile of droppings wearing glasses, complete with wavy stink lines above it.

Toshinori sighs deeply.

What did you get for question eight?

Which day?

Today's homework.

Izuku sifts through a few pages of finished equations before finding the problem Todoroki specified. *Two times the square root of two, divided by three.*

The library is supposed to be a quiet place, which makes it ideal for sign language practice. Todoroki even suggested a sign-language-only rule between them: whenever they study together in the library, they don't talk out loud to each other unless any of the others join them. Iida and Uraraka picked up a bit of sign themselves, back when Izuku was still mute from Kamino, but they haven't stuck to it as faithfully since school started. Izuku can't really blame them; Uraraka has enough on her plate with keeping her academics up to par, and Iida's busy with his class rep duties. Todoroki, on the other hand, has little or no trouble keeping his grades up, and aside from remedial training there's nothing stopping him. He can hold a conversation fairly easily by now; Izuku only has to stop and fingerspell every once in a while.

At the moment, Izuku has books piled in front of him as he tries to get ahead. Over the past couple of days he's been begging future classwork out of their teachers, hoping to finish as much of it as he can before his internship starts. He'll still have class whenever Nighteye doesn't need him, but it never hurts to be prepared. Besides, it means he can help Todoroki check his answers for mathematics. Or Todoroki can help him check his own answers. Either or both.

After a while, the lines on his notebook paper start to blur and crisscross, so he sits back to rub his eyes.

You okay? Todoroki asks.

Fine. Just need to rest my eyes. Izuku blinks a few times. *How's your training?*

Bakugou is going to drive me insane.

You'll survive, Izuku assures him, smiling faintly. Todoroki barely smiles back, just a twitch of the mouth that doesn't reach his eyes. *Something wrong?*

I don't think they know what to do with me sometimes, Todoroki answers, pulling a wry face. *Bakugou's problems are obvious. Mine aren't, and I can't exactly tell them.*

Izuku hums in sympathy. *Yoarashi isn't giving you trouble, is he?*

Todoroki shakes his head. *No. Not the way you'd expect, at least.* At

Izuku's questioning look he pauses, fingers twitching as he thinks about his answer or tries to remember the correct signs for it. *He's trying to make up for what he said before Toga got to him. But he's…* This part he fingerspells: *overcompensating.*

Overcompensating, Izuku echoes, to show him the right sign for it. He sees Todoroki's hands twitch as they run through it a few times. *How?*

He says he misjudged me, and that's fine, Todoroki says. *But he's also saying he might have misjudged Endeavor, too.*

"Oof," Izuku says softly, stretching their rule. Todoroki pulls a face again. *Are you going to correct him?*

Would that be petty? Todoroki asks. *I'm trying to leave him behind, not drag other people into holding a grudge with me.*

That isn't holding a grudge, Izuku points out. *He doesn't like your dad. You don't like your dad. That's called finding common ground.*

Todoroki snorts softly. *Besides, he's the number one hero now. He might be a bastard, but he's the only one who's ever come close to All-Might's level. He's the only one who ever tried to.*

There's no easy answer, at least none that Izuku can think of. He's trying to wrack his brain for one when Rei's high-pitched static makes him turn his head. She's coming into the library, trailing after Togata and Amajiki. Togata's arm is half raised, his mouth open as if he's ready to call out, but he lowers his hand and grins when he sees that Izuku's already spotted him.

"Afternoon, Midoriya! And you, Todoroki." Behind him, Amajiki echoes him at a mumble.

Hey, Togata-senpai, what's up? It takes him a moment and a bewildered look from Togata to realize that he's greeted him in sign. Todoroki's barely hiding a smirk, and Izuku elbows him lightly and is about to repeat himself when Togata answers with his hands.

If you're not busy later, I wanted to talk to you about Monday, he says. *Won't take long.*

Izuku gapes. He's not looking, but he's pretty sure Todoroki is staring too. Amajiki looks equal parts pleased and ready to sink into the floor.

"Um, I'm good now," Izuku blurts out, too startled to think of

anything clever to say. “Todoroki, can you watch my stuff?”

“Sure thing.” Todoroki turns back to his math textbook. If he’s put out by impending internship talk, he doesn’t show it.

“I didn’t know you knew sign,” Izuku admits awkwardly, once they’re out of the library. Amajiki has vanished into the stacks rather than follow them out.

“We learned when we were kids,” Togata says. “Me and Tamaki. We thought it was cool, havin’ a secret language to talk to each other without anyone understanding. I mean, turns out it’s not all that secret. Apparently it’s not uncommon for pro heroes to learn a bit of it. Just enough for combat signals and stuff, or talking to each other during covert ops. You and Todoroki look pretty fluent, though! How’d you pick it up?”

“I went through a phase where—” Izuku stops. The excuse that he once gave All-Might floats at the tip of his tongue. It’s an easy lie; most lies are, but this one has a bit of practice behind it.

Except… it’s not really a necessary one, is it?

Be direct, he reminds himself. *Be more open.* Out loud, he starts over. “I go mute sometimes, when I’m under enough stress. It happened first when I was seven, and after Kamino…” He shrugs. “I figured I’d get by just texting and writing stuff down, but Todoroki decided to learn.”

“Well, that’s good to know,” Togata says. “Thanks for telling me, Midoriya. I haven’t gotten a feel for your limits just yet, but internships like these can get pretty intense.”

A nervous flutter stirs in his chest, and Izuku swallows it and pushes forward before it can show on his face. “I think I’ll be fine, long as I don’t have to play house with Toga Himiko again,” he says with a wry grin. “The bar’s pretty high at this point.”

Instead of laughing it off, Togata does an odd little twisty thing with his eyebrows that’s gone before Izuku can translate it to an emotion. “Not exactly a good mindset to start with,” he says. “That was one of the things I wanted to bring up—it’s good to be confident, and I don’t doubt you’ve got experience already, especially considering Kamino, but this’ll be different from what you’ve seen so far.”

Izuku tries not to wince. He knows this, but maybe putting on a cocky front isn’t the best strategy. “Right. Sorry.”

“It’s all right. Like I said, at the very least I’ll be with you at the start, and I think Sir’s pretty set on having me keep an eye on you.” He brightens. “I don’t exactly have seniority in his office, so it’s not often he gets to exercise my management skills. He doesn’t take on new interns very often, at least as far as I’ve seen. He’s pretty particular.”

High standards, All-Might had said. And Izuku has a sinking feeling that Nighteye only gave him a chance because he expected him to fail that test—and he would have, almost definitely, if not for Rei. He forces his misgivings behind another grin. “What’d you do to get him to like you so much? You must know some good jokes. Did it take props, or is he more of an improv kind of guy?”

Togata shakes his head, smiling a little. “Honestly, I couldn’t tell you. For one thing, he was the one who sought me out, a little over a year ago. I’m not sure exactly what he saw in me, but… I’ve come a long way, and I owe it all to him.” Izuku nods, keeping his face neutral. That confirms one assumption; Mirio doesn’t know about One For All, or Nighteye’s intentions to have it passed to him. “Just… try to be patient, you know? Show him what you do best, and listen if he tells you how to do it better. And if you can’t speak his language, then just…”

“High-five Uraraka, aim for the sun, got it,” Izuku says automatically, then suppresses the urge to wince.

Togata gives him a long, considering look. “It’s okay to be nervous, you know,” he says. “There’s no shame in it.”

Izuku flushes in embarrassment.

“You’re a little more like Sir than I first thought,” Togata goes on, a little ruefully. “It’s just your sense of humor that’s different. I mean, he brushes things off when he’s uncomfortable, too.”

He’s not entirely sure how to take that.

“That’s a good place to start, you know,” Togata says. “Common ground.” He smiles again. “I was nervous before my first patrol with him, too. So, I get it. And I can look out for you.”

Izuku lets himself deflate a little. “Thanks, senpai.”

“And hey, just keep this in mind—it’s just the first patrol! It’s pretty unlikely that we’ll run into anything we can’t handle between us.”

“What do you make of him, Mirio?”

It’s by design that Mirio arrives at the office before Midoriya does; this isn’t something to discuss when Midoriya is within earshot, nor present at all. Truthfully, Nighteye wanted to have this conversation earlier, but it’s better for Mirio to have enough time to make a properly informed answer.

The young man blinks in surprise, barely pausing before answering. “Midoriya? It’s like I said before, Sir. He’s strong and he’s driven, and… well, considering what he’s been through, that’s kind of a given, isn’t it? I know the media likes to tell a good story, but there’s plenty of truth to it. And he’s clever, too, and quite resourceful from what I’ve seen—that’s the part they left out of the news. I get the feeling he’s stronger than he lets on, and I’m not sure if it has to do with just his quirk.”

Nighteye purses his lips, wrestling with the disparity in their knowledge. Of course Mirio wouldn’t know that a lot of his cleverness can be chalked up to hearing the voices of the dead—who would guess? But in any case—“I don’t mean his skills as a potential hero,” he says. “Those don’t worry me. Even if they were less than satisfactory, he’s only a first year and they can be improved. What concerns me more is the shape of his character.”

At this, his protege frowns. “Sir?”

“You’ve spent more time with him in a less professional setting,” Nighteye says. “I trust your judgment, and I value your honest opinion. What do you think of him?”

This time, Mirio takes longer to respond. His brow creases in a thoughtful frown as he shapes his answer carefully before offering it. “Honestly, sir? I think he’s a teenage boy.”

Nighteye blinks.

Mirio looks sheepish for a moment. “I know, it should be obvious, but… that’s really it, isn’t it? I think he’s a kid who’s doing his best to pretend he doesn’t feel like he’s in over his head. I think he feels like he’s alone and nobody knows what it’s like to be him, and he wants to prove himself but he’s also desperate to find someone who understands what he’s going through.” He stops to grin brightly at Nighteye. “I mean, he’s basically where I was, back then. That’s why I brought him here.”

Nighteye doesn't have as much time as he'd like to formulate a response; the boy in question will be arriving shortly, so he offers a noncommittal nod and thanks Mirio for his answer.

It makes a little sense, of course. Youth is volatile. The underground hero Eraserhead said it best, all those weeks ago on the night that the League of Villains was raided. Teenagers are in flux, and what they are at one moment is not necessarily what they will always be. Nighteye knows this.

But he also knows that people, young and old, are shaped by their quirks. Be it the power itself or what society expects of it, the quirk or lack thereof forms an integral and immutable part of one's identity. It shapes one's physical needs, one's emotional needs, one's outlook on life…

and death, as well.

Midoriya arrives with minutes to spare, dressed for patrol. His face looks weary but his eyes are as sharp as ever. A shiver runs up and down Nighteye's spine as his uncertainty grows to agitation.

He briefs them before the patrol starts; he'll be with Bubble Girl, one of his sidekicks, while Mirio and Midoriya cover another area. It's mostly reconnaissance for now; he balks at the idea of sending interns after a villain like Overhaul.

With All For One dead and All-Might permanently retired, the criminal underworld has exploded. Opportunistic gangs and organizations rush to fill the spaces left in the power vacuum, striking while the iron is hot and the hero world struggles to work around All-Might's absence. Overhaul is one of the most worrying of them, a young gangster looking to restore the old yakuzas. All-Might's time as the Symbol of Peace left those groups a pale shadow of their former selves; with him gone, it stands to reason that the younger upstarts would want to reclaim the glory of past generations. His plan isn't clear just yet, but it has to do with the drug trade; new quirk suppressant bullets have surfaced on the black market. It's not clear where Overhaul is getting his supply, or how it's being produced, but hopefully they'll have some answers soon.

Any information would be a boon; at this point they don't know what his quirk is, or even what he looks like behind that beaklike mask.

And so, it's time for reconnaissance. The areas they're covering today are hot spots of yakuza activity and sightings of Overhaul himself. If

Nighteye can track down even the lowest footsoldier, a quick tap on the shoulder and a—careful—application of his quirk may tell him at least where they're hiding. And as for the other pair… no one pays much attention to wide-eyed interns. Mirio can play the part, and Midoriya doesn't have to. With any luck, they'll be in a good position to spot something useful.

When he's finished, Midoriya steps closer and speaks under his breath, head angled away so the others won't overhear. Mirio pauses to wait for him, and Midoriya waves him on. Nighteye gives Bubble Girl a nod, and she steps away as well.

"I can ask around, too," Midoriya tells him. "A villain like Overhaul's bound to have ghosts with him. Most of the League do, too. Should I keep an ear out for anything useful?"

Logically, it's a good plan. It's enormously useful. Frighteningly so, even. Nighteye's stomach turns at the thought, and the eager, hopeful look in Midoriya's strange eyes isn't helping. If Nighteye didn't know better, he'd say the boy was *hoping* Overhaul and his ilk were murderers surrounded by the ghosts of their victims.

"Do so," he says, grudgingly. "And do *not* take unnecessary risks."

"Not much chance of that," Midoriya points out. "Aizawa-sensei's already told us that most pros just patrol for show anyway."

The cavalier words set his teeth on edge. "If you chose this because you thought it would be easy, then it only makes me question certain careless decisions even more."

Midoriya looks away quickly, probably to try to hide how he's rolling his eyes.

"My convictions have not changed," Nighteye says coolly. "Your supposed quirklessness was only one source of my misgivings. In fact, the quirk that you do have only raises new concerns."

At this, the student bridles visibly, and nearly glares at him. "I can help people with it. I *have* helped people with it."

Nighteye's mouth tightens. "That's beside the point."

"How is that beside the—?"

"There's a difference between having potential as a hero and being

worthy of One For All," Nighteye tells him coldly. "You may be one, but you are not both."

Midoriya stares at him for a moment longer, then turns his back. Nighteye can't see his face, but he can imagine another eye-roll. "Thank you for your input." With that he stalks off in the direction Mirio is taking. Up ahead, the older boy waits for him to catch up.

As Midoriya hurries away, back still turned, another chill takes hold of Nighteye. He rides it out as stoically as he can, swallowing back his trepidation.

He probably should have used his quirk on one of them, at least to make sure that their patrol goes smoothly. But there is little he hates more than the thought of using his quirk on the young.

He can't quantify it. Nor can he account for the icy dread that fills him at the thought of looking into Midoriya Izuku's future again.

"What the *fuck*," Nana blurts out once they're out of hearing range of Nighteye. It's an odd choice, considering that he can't hear her anyway, but Izuku supposes that habits are habits. "What the *actual fuck*."

Rei cackles. There's not much that Izuku can say with Togata right next to him, so he settles for shooting them both a pained look.

Either he's gotten a lot worse at hiding things, or Rei's gone and tattled on him. He can't think of any other reason why Nana would insist on accompanying him today. Usually she can hardly be parted from All-Might, and he wishes that could have held true today. The last thing he wanted was for Nighteye's disapproval to reach her ears —or heaven forbid, All-Might's. It would feel too much like his first experience with real hero work was more than he could handle, like he had to run crying to his mentor because his new supervisor was mean to him.

"I mean, who does he think he is?" Nana goes on, face crumpling into a righteous scowl. "Sorahiko might've griped about Toshi's habits, but he never tried to tell me who to give *my* quirk to—" She continues to grumble, and Izuku tunes her out.

He can see why she would take Nighteye's words personally, but he can't bring himself to feel the same. Nighteye's opinion on who gets One For All just doesn't matter to him, at all; he might as well get

offended over Todoroki liking soba more than katsudon.

A light knock to the side of his head brings him back to attention. Sheepishly he looks to Togata, then glances around in case there's something he's supposed to be looking at. "Sorry, what?"

"Thought I lost you there," Togata says good-naturedly. "Your eyes sort of rolled back and you disappeared for a minute. Keep a lookout, now. You remember those photographs Sir showed us before we headed out?"

Izuku nods. Nighteye showed them photographs of Overhaul and a couple of his known lieutenants—for all the good that did. No one's managed to catch them unmasked before, so if they're wandering around barefaced, he's not likely to spot them.

"Keep an eye out for them, and for any foul play," Togata advises. "Usually the presence of heroes is enough of a deterrent, but some villains are bold, especially nowadays. Just pay attention to your surroundings. If you don't, it's easier for someone to get the drop on you."

"Right, got it." Izuku lets his eyes wander throughout the crowds, scanning not just the living but the dead as well. There are quite a few of the latter, passing through but not lingering or haunting. They aren't thick and crowded and choking the way they were in the warehouse in Kamino Ward, and there are no familiar faces, not that he's expecting any. Izuku has to wonder what kind of villain Overhaul is, and how many ghosts he has following him.

Nana squeezes his shoulder gently. "Sorry for distracting you," she murmurs. "Tell you what, I'll have a look around. Might as well be helpful, long as I'm here."

"Ask other ghosts if they've seen anything," Izuku murmurs out of the corner of his mouth.

She nods. "C'mon, Rei, let's go see what there is to see."

He almost doesn't hear that, because Togata speaks up at the same time. "Did you say something?"

"Just talking to myself," Izuku says as he watches Nana and Rei disappear into the crowd.

"Any thoughts worth sharing?"

“How much of a deterrent are we, really?” Izuku asks, as he continues idly scanning their surroundings. “We’re pretty obviously students—well, I’m pretty obviously a student. And considering how bold villains are being, you’d think a couple of unsupervised students would be targets more than deterrents.”

He can almost feel Togata’s sharp look on the back of his head. “Your class really has been in the firing line, huh?”

Izuku leaves off watching passersby to look the older student in the eye. “I was kidnapped for four days, senpai.”

At this, Togata looks a bit sheepish. “Right.”

“And it’s not like things were any better before that. Two villain attacks in a year, three if you count the door disintegrating on the first week of school, four if you count three of us being in Hosu the night Stain was arrested…” Izuku shrugs, grinning wryly. “Probably safer to assume *someone’s* out to get me.”

“Well, you have a point,” Togata concedes. “But, don’t underestimate the power of this.” He tugs lightly at Izuku’s hood. “It’s something I noticed when I started taking on real internships—even if you’re still a kid, people look at you and talk to you differently when you’re in costume. That’s why they say patrols are mostly for show. Besides—we’re in public, several different agencies patrol this area, and in an emergency Sir’ll be here at the press of a panic button. Just keep a weather eye out and we’ll be fine.”

For the most part, Togata is right. A few passersby call out greetings, and Izuku lets Togata do most of the talking. He smiles when people greet him and makes eye contact with various ghosts, just so they know he can see them and he’s paying attention. When the dead greet him, he spares close-lipped smiles for them, as well. The surprise and delight he sees on their pale faces is well worth it. Before long, the familiar chill of Rei’s presence returns, and he looks up with his hand twitching in a furtive wave.

Then the chill sharpens to an icy claw of fear, and he jerks his head up to look when Rei arrives.

Her face is urgent, black eyes leaking, lips curled in a menacing grimace. She waves at him to follow, and her movement are erratic enough that he barely catches her signs.

—hurry up she’s in trouble—

“Hey senpai, do we have a set path?” he asks.

“Not particularly,” Togata replies. “Just the area we’re supposed to patrol. Why?”

“Can we head this way?” he asks, gesturing in the direction Rei beckons. “Thought I saw something. Might be nothing, but…”

Togata’s dark eyes flicker past him, sharpening with focus. “Define ‘something’.”

“Face from a photograph,” he says. It’s a quick lie, easily brushed off with the excuse that those faces were masked and difficult to identify. “Like I said, I might be wrong, but…”

“It’s worth checking,” Togata says with a nod. “Let’s go.”

Izuku picks up the pace a little as he sets off to follow Rei, and is relieved when Togata wordlessly matches it rather than calling him on it. He keeps an eye on Rei’s back, making sure not to lose her as they weave their way through the crowd.

“Oh, by the way, it slipped my mind,” Togata says. It sounds like small talk, but when Izuku glances at him, Togata’s face is just as sharp and focused as he feels. “What’s your hero name? I haven’t thought to ask before now.”

“Oh, it’s Deku,” Izuku replies. “Long story. You?”

“Lemillion,” Togata says with a grin. “It’s my running minimum—I want to save at least one million lives before I can really consider myself remotely satisfied as a hero. And even then it’s more of a jumping off point than a cap. Plus it’s a play on my name. The English word sounds similar, so…”

“Clever,” Izuku says absently. He does mean it, but Rei is slowing down and moving to the side, pointing ahead to something he should see through the loose throng of people—

Oh.

His eyes are quick enough to catch it ahead of time—movement through the sea of legs, small and quick and pale but not ghost-pale.

He doesn’t have time to alert Togata before the nearest people part and the tiny figure comes stumbling through on unsteady legs. Izuku

barely has time to kneel down and reach out before the small, solid weight crashing into him and *clings*.

Immediately his senses are assaulted—not by the child trembling in his arms but the ghost that accompanies her. He tries to look up at it, but his eyes hurt; they keep flickering in and out of view, even worse than the most volatile poltergeists he's ever come across. It's hard to focus on them, nearly impossible to translate the shifting, unstable apparition into the image of a person. The voice is harsh and grating against his ears, a desperate shriek that drills deep into his brain until he can barely pick it apart into words.

"*—he's coming, help her, get her away, ple**ase, don't let him touch her again—***"

Nana's there, speaking urgently to the spirit, but there's not enough of them there to understand. Rei places herself between them and Izuku, and he lets himself focus on the living.

"Hey there," he says softly, hesitant to touch the child. What if she's injured? What if he makes it worse by accident? "Are you all right? Is someone after you?"

She's small, painfully small—tinier than Rei, tinier than Kouta, thin and unkempt in a faded threadbare smock. Tangled white hair falls over her face, parted at the right side of her forehead by a single tiny horn, and spilling down her shoulders and past her bandaged arms. Izuku holds her as gently as he can, tense and alarmed as she whispers almost too quietly for him to hear.

"*Don't let go.*" She isn't looking at him. She's looking straight ahead, barely blinking, trembling violently from head to toe as she clutches him. "*Please, don't let go.*"

The tormented ghost screams at him in wordless pain.

"Izuku," Nana's voice cuts through the ghost's ear-splitting distress, and her cold grip drags him back to his feet. "Izuku, take that girl and get out. Get out, *now*. That man in the mask, Overhaul? He's after her. He's coming, Izuku, *get out before you run out of time.*"

As he stands, the grip on him tightens. The little girl clutches handfuls of his costume, and he keeps his hands on her shoulders. She said not to let go; he's not going to let go.

"Deku?" Togata steps closer, hand falling on his shoulder. "Deku, what

did she say?"

Before Izuku can reply, the tortured ghost shrieks again, Rei snarls a warning, and he looks up in the direction that the girl came.

It's hard to see, with all the passersby shifting and passing between them. But—there, through the crowd—

Izuku doesn't need to recognize a bare face. Not when Overhaul wears the mask in public.

"Lemillion," he hisses. The grip on his shoulder tightens. He's out of time. "We can lose him in the crowd—"

"Go," Togata murmurs. "I'll meet you back where we split off from Sir." When Izuku hesitates, he shoves at him. "I'll stall him and anyone with him, *go.*"

There's no time to argue. Izuku tugs the little girl up as gently as he dares and slips through the crowd. She's slow, her steps unsteady, so he lifts her up and carries her, heart in his throat.

"Not too fast, kiddo," Nana tells him. "Walk fast but don't run. If you run, he'll see the movement through the crowd. Just weave through, you're doing great."

"Tell me if you see anyone watching or following," he murmurs. If the girl in his arms thinks anything of him speaking to empty air, she says nothing, just hides her face in his shoulder and holds on. He shifts his grip on her, resting her weight on his hip. He can hear Nana talking to other ghosts around him, spreading the word, asking for help, but he can't let go of the panic just yet.

Togata's still back there—Togata's *alone* with Overhaul, facing down a dangerous man without any backup. They're both separated and alone, and maybe they should have thought this plan through more, but damn it there hadn't been *time*.

"It's all right," he says under his breath. "It's all right. I'll meet up with some friends, and we'll take you somewhere safe. Okay?"

The child nods against him.

"What's your name?" he asks.

For a moment he thinks she's not going to answer, but then, "*Eri*,"

reaches his ears in the softest whisper.

“Nice to meet you, Eri,” he murmurs back. “You can call me Deku. Just hang on, this’ll be over soon, okay?”

She doesn’t answer, and Izuku turns to the ghost following at his elbow. Rei’s hair swirls in agitation as he meets her eyes, and a desperate idea comes to him in an instant.

“Ah, that’s a little odd, isn’t it,” is the first thing Mirio hears Overhaul say when he “wanders” into the villain’s path. “You’re a hero, right? Did your partner go off and leave you here alone?”

His heart is in his throat as he curses his haste. It was a mistake, splitting up like that, but something in the air had put Mirio on edge, ratcheting up his fear until he acted on impulse rather than coming up with a better plan.

Outwardly he puts on the same winning smile he offers everyone. Overhaul isn’t a very well-known villain, and while that beaklike mask may be distinctive, there’s nothing overtly special about it. Plenty of people have need of assistive devices for various disruptive quirks, and it’s not out of the ordinary to stylize them. If he plays his cards right, then he can get away with not recognizing the villain for who he is.

“Ah, my partner’s run off for the moment,” he says sheepishly. “It’s his first day, so he pulled a bit of a rookie mistake. I just hope our supervisor won’t be too upset with me! We’re both fledgling heroes, but I have seniority, so I was supposed to be looking after him. Guess he got a little excited—he’s one of those eager-to-prove himself types.” He keeps his speech casual and unhurried, hoping against hope he’s buying time. He doesn’t dare look to see if Midoriya’s still in sight.

“I see. Now, there was a girl with you, earlier.” Above the mask, Overhaul’s eyes narrow. “I saw her reach you, from far off. Do you think you could call your partner to bring her back? I’m afraid we got separated in the crowd, and she must have panicked.”

Mirio blinks in surprise, eyes wide and innocent. “Ah, she was with you?”

“My daughter,” Overhaul explains, and Mirio’s blood runs cold. “She’s a troublesome child.”

The girl had been thin, malnourished, and poorly dressed. Beneath the sleeves and hem of her shabby covering, her arms and legs had been wrapped in bandaging. “I see,” he says, forcing the disgust and revulsion deeper into his chest, where it wouldn’t make his voice tremble. “I’m so very sorry, sir. She ran off again before we could stop her. That’s why my partner’s gone, you see. He ran after her to try to catch her before she got hurt—”

“Which way?” the villain asks.

Mirio hems and haws for a moment, finally taking the opportunity to look around. It’s a good thing Midoriya hadn’t had his hood up when he left, or the shape of it would have shown through the crowd and given him away— “It could’ve been… but, oh wait, she wasn’t running in a straight line, so maybe…? Goodness, I think I’m getting confused. You know, I could try calling him—”

“Are you sure you can’t remember?” There’s an edge to the villain’s tone.

His eyes catch movement. A small figure in a long white shirt, bare from the knees down, darts through the crowd of legs. Mirio turns away, fighting down panic. The girl’s back—how? Did Midoriya lose her?

“Ah, there she is.” The villain’s voice reaches him again. “Thank you for your help, hero.”

No, no, *no*. “Are you quite sure?” he asks, reaching for the villain’s arm, if only to stall him a moment more. “I thought I saw them heading—”

“*Don’t touch me.*”

He pulls back, pulse stuttering with a sudden spike of fear. The villain has been calm thus far, almost friendly, and the sudden poisonous menace in his tone stop Mirio short. In spite of the words, the villain doesn’t pull away; if anything, he thrusts himself closer and forces Mirio to back away and drop his hand. Cold eyes bore into him from over the mask, and Mirio wonders if the villain will kill him then and there, in broad daylight, if he makes the mistake of touching him.

Best not to find out.

“I apologize,” he says. “I meant no offense. I was only trying to help.”

“Don’t worry, little hero.” Overhaul’s voice is calm and friendly again, as if the moment of fury never happened at all. “You’ve been plenty of help.”

He’s gone before Mirio can get another word out, and he has little choice but to watch him go.

His phone buzzes. Mirio is already weaving through the crowd as he checks it, dreading the inevitable message that the little girl has slipped through Midoriya’s fingers.

Back at meeting point, it reads. *Girl safe. Pls respond. Nighteye might actually kill me if u die.*

He walks with purpose, but does not hurry. Eri is small and tired, and her time with him has burned the hope from her. She won’t get far; as irritating as this little adventure has been, he never expected her to. The heroes were a close call, but his luck has held. It would have been a pity, to have to kill a pair of heroes before they got old enough to be interesting.

He follows the darting figure ahead of him as glimpses of her disappear and reappear through the loose crowd. She’s headed for the side streets, away from the main road—good. Less people to see her struggle when he takes her back.

As he breaks free from the crowd, he sees the hem of a smock disappear around the corner of an alley, and smiles. That way leads to a dead end, lined with bare brick walls. No doors, no escape routes, not even a dumpster to hide behind. He turns the corner, mouth opening to call her back.

Before him, the alleyway stands empty.

He stands there, frozen and contemplative, as the bare walls seem to mock him. She isn’t here. He saw her turn here and she isn’t here, which means he was tricked into seeing something that wasn’t real, which means… she must still be with the heroes…

The heart of his entire operation, in the hands of those—sick, contaminated, poisonous, *vermin*—

It comes without warning. His unease roars up, growing into overwhelming terror in an instant.

They'll infect her, fill her with the same disease that's taken over the world, the obsession and worship that pollutes the very air they breathe, *he hasn't manufactured the cure yet, just the treatment, he needs her* ***back or it's all for nothing, everything has been for nothing***

Minutes pass before it fades, terror ebbing, pounding heartbeat easing until he can hear again over the deafening pulse in his ears. Rationality eases back into his mind, beating back the fear.

Never mind. No matter. If they ruin her, if they contaminate her, it doesn't matter. He'll fix it, fix her, and if he has to take her apart and put her back together again to do it, then fine. It's all fine.

He just has to get her back first. He's lost time chasing a mirage; probably one of the heroes' quirks at work. They're likely long gone by now, with Eri hidden away behind lock and key and armed guard.

He takes a deep, slow breath, drinking in the clean unpolluted air that filters through the mask.

A setback, that's all. He can recover

The thought carries him back to the safety of home, past the pleas and apologies of Eri's last babysitter as he reduces the man to a spatter on the wall with a careless brush of his hand.

Chapter End Notes

> Content warning: implied child abuse, attempted abduction, non-graphic murder.

Chapter 52

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the lack of art last chapter! We've got twice as much this time.

spidermonkey1292

skys-personal-hell

goddamntheseshinanigans

blitz-draws

jimjams-fiddles

magusthemage

goldenrose24

cricketmilk

landofdrawsandfrogs

wiredbysophi

pastelstoppable

dokidekudoki

As always, this story has a TV Tropes page!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mirio's message brings him running, of course.

Upon receiving it, Nighteye parts ways with Bubble Girl and makes his way back to the spot where he last saw his two interns, with all the speed that he can possibly muster. He curses himself all the while, curses the cowardice that kept him from looking into either of their futures before he left them. If he had, then he might have prevented both of them from encountering Overhaul alone. Outwardly he keeps himself calm and professional as he weaves through the crowds of civilians walking the streets, but his heart is in his throat and he won't feel remotely calm until he sees the both of them in front of him, in

one piece.

When he finally nears the spot, he does find both Mirio and Midoriya waiting for him, alive and uninjured.

A third pair of eyes watches him from afar, tucked firmly against Midoriya's side where their owner clings as if she never wants to let go. She's small, poorly dressed, and half-hidden behind his younger intern. When Nighteye looks back at her, she hides her face in Midoriya's costume.

Mirio looks worried as he watches their surroundings. Midoriya looks ready to kill something.

They don't waste time. They've been out here too long and it's liable to attract attention. Calling for a transport back to the agency is the work of a few moments, and he only lets himself start to feel relief when they're all whisked away out of sight, back to the safety of the office. Mirio makes his report as succinctly as possible. The whole time, the little girl makes no sound, and neither does Midoriya—not even to add to Mirio's account, or offer his own. Somewhere between the meeting point and the office, the girl falls fast asleep.

His agency is large enough to have its own on-site medical team, so that not every injury requires a trip to the hospital. They're certainly good enough to assess the condition of a child, and his office has better security than the average public hospital.

Upon their arrival, the medical team is waiting for them. They take charge of the girl, which is easier than Nighteye had feared, because sheer exhaustion keeps her from waking up. Midoriya gives her up without a word, face blank.

Mirio is shamefaced on the way back to his office, Midoriya sullen. At the very least, his protege waits until they're back in his office before speaking. "Sir, about what we—" He falls silent when Nighteye holds up his hand.

"I'm not going to reprimand you for separating," he says. "Because I think you both understand how foolhardy that was, and either of you could have been killed. You're both extremely lucky that Overhaul didn't have underlings scattered throughout the crowd keeping a lookout." He looks at Midoriya as he says this, just in time to catch the end of an eye-roll. "Something to say, Midoriya?"

"We didn't exactly have a *choice*," Midoriya says.

Nighteye regards him for a moment. “The girl shows signs of long-term imprisonment,” he says at length. It’s by far the *kindest* phrasing for the state she is currently in. “Which means that, for whatever reason, Overhaul needs her alive. The same cannot be said for either of you.”

“He wouldn’t kill her,” Mirio says. “He said it himself—if she’s his daughter, then—”

“Of *course* she isn’t his daughter!” Midoriya snaps at him. “He’s a *villain*. You think that’s not what every kidnapper and trafficker says when they’re walking off with someone else’s kid? ‘Oh, don’t worry, she’s just *my daughter* or *my niece* or *my cousin*, I’m just babysitting for the day, don’t mind her, she has such a wild imagination, doesn’t she?’ I mean *come on*, she doesn’t even *look* like him!”

“That’s *enough*, Midoriya,” Nighteye cuts him off, silencing him with a frown. Mirio looks a little ashamed of himself, and that’s the last thing they need right now. “Mirio, Bubble Girl should be arriving soon. Tell her to report to me when she arrives, then get started on your report.” His protege nods to him and leaves.

“I’m sorry,” Midoriya says bluntly once he’s gone. “But it’s true. I’ve *met* kids like that before, and it’s always the same story. It’s the easiest lie in the world, it always works, and for once I’d rather *not* have to listen to another dead kid tell me where she’s buried.”

Bile crawls up his throat. “Be that as it may,” he says sharply. “Lashing out at Mirio that way helped no one. Such behavior is unbecoming of anyone who would claim to be a hero, and it is unacceptable in this office. Am I clear?”

Midoriya flinches. “Yes, Sir.”

“And at least for now, it wouldn’t matter if she truly was biologically related to him,” Nighteye continues. “Considering Overhaul’s status as a wanted villain and murderer, and the state in which she was found, he could hardly make a case for her return legally.”

“Can I see her again?” Midoriya asks.

The shift is abrupt, Midoriya’s annoyance vanishing to give way to his usual calm, unsettling stare. Nighteye lifts an eyebrow. Midoriya has never quite struck him as the sort to gallivant about with children, frightening ghost children aside. But it does make sense; he might be callous in his words, but that doesn’t mean he’s devoid of empathy.

“The exact logistics for her care will be decided after she’s given medical and psychological exams,” he says. “It’s likely, all things considered.”

Midoriya looks relieved. “Good, because she has a ghost with her, and I’m about eighty percent sure it’s her *actual* parent.”

Or not. “A ghost,” Nighteye echoes.

“It’s part of how I knew to get Eri out so fast in the first place,” Midoriya continues. “That’s her name, by the way—Eri. But anyway, Rei and Ms. Nana went out to keep a lookout for me, and they led me to her. When I found her, there was a ghost with her, and they’ve stuck with her since. They’re too unstable for me to learn anything from them yet—I can’t even tell what they were supposed to look like—but they were pretty intent on getting Eri away from Overhaul.”

“What do you mean you can’t tell what they look like?” Nighteye asks. “I thought you said your quirk was vision-based.”

“It’s complicated,” Midoriya says. “See, ghosts are… they’re not like living people. Memories and thoughts and feelings—those are things we have, but for ghosts, that’s what they’re made of. So if they’re… mentally unstable, I guess—if they’re frightened or if they’ve been through something terrible—they don’t… look right. Most of the time they just go back to looking however they looked when they died, which usually isn’t pretty. But sometimes they just sort of… flicker. Like a TV with bad reception. And this ghost is the worst case of flickering I’ve ever seen. It’s like trying to look at a cloud of static and figure out the image on the screen. I mean, even the Noumu ghosts had more stability than that—”

“You’ve seen the ghosts of *Noumu*.”

“I was in that warehouse in Kamino for almost four days, sir. And All For One’s killed a *lot* of people. A lot of angry, impatient people.” A moment later the boy blinks hard and shakes his head. Something tugs at the back of Nighteye’s mind, a wisp of uncomfortable familiarity, but he loses it when the boy speaks again. “Anyway, I’d like to talk to that ghost later. Obviously something bad’s been happening to that girl, and it’s probably what drove the ghost crazy, so either they're her parent, or they'r'e someone else Overhaul was torturing. They might settle down a little now that she’s safe.” He smiles, but it doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “There’s a lot that I could ask them. Ghosts have a lot of good information.”

“I see,” Nighteye says, and his mind races.

This is… useful. It’s *disturbingly* useful, even more so than Foresight has ever been, and that’s saying something. It keeps the taste of bile in the back of his throat, which is a sensation that usually only bothers him on the occasion that he uses his own power. If Midoriya is going to be offering it up so freely throughout his time here, then… well, that’s going to take some adjusting. If he could just frame it differently…

“An autopsy.” It’s not until he sees Midoriya blinking at him in confusion that he realizes he said it out loud.

“What?”

Nighteye shakes his head, regretting his slip. “Your ability. Gathering information from the dead. It’s on par with an autopsy, only everyone involved has a bit more say in it.”

The boy blinks at him again, eyes widening. His eyebrows come together in a pensive look. “Oh. Huh. I… never thought about it that way.”

Before Nighteye has the chance to say something equally foolish, there’s a knock at the door. “Come in,” he says, and one of his medical staff enters.

“Sorry to bother you, Sir Nighteye, but could we borrow Deku for a moment?” The woman nods to his intern. “It’s the little girl. She’s asking for him.”

Midoriya shoots him a hopeful look, and he nods. “Whatever is necessary,” he says. “Midoriya—once you’re finished, talk to Mirio. He’ll show you how reports are filed.”

“Yes, Sir.” Midoriya follows the nurse out of his office.

Alone, Nighteye draws in a deep breath and lets it out. All in all, the day has been eventful. Fruitful as well, certainly. He started the day expecting sightings at most, reports and reconnaissance and confirmation of various suspicions and hypotheses. And instead, they’ve snatched a girl from his clutches—a witness, if one wants to be ruthlessly practical about it, but the rescue of a child in peril is more than worthwhile for its own sake.

One step closer to dismantling Overhaul’s operation, as well—and it

can't be too soon. The remnants of the League are still at large, and the possibility that the two entities might come together…

It doesn't bear thinking about. All For One may be dead, but if Shigaraki Tomura gets his hands on Overhaul's resources and manpower, it won't matter.

There is still so much to be done, and no worthy Symbol of Peace to help. Midoriya Izuku cannot take that place—he acts like he doesn't even *want* to take that place, even though he accepted One For All and the responsibilities that come with it. The pillar is gone, and the only one remotely capable of replacing it has no intentions of doing so. He's a decent hero, if his success today is any indication, but the world is full of decent heroes. Nighteye himself is a decent hero, and so he knows better than anyone that decent heroes are not enough and will *never be enough*—

His phone buzzes on his desk. Eager for the distraction, he answers it without bothering to look.

He hears silence. It stretches for quite a bit longer than is normally considered polite, but Nighteye knows better than to hang up prematurely. So he waits, until finally—

"*It's me.*"

It's wrong, that his heart sinks at the sound of that voice. The last time he heard that voice over the phone, its owner was delivering a sound rejection, and he's not eager to repeat the experience. He has no reason now to feel reassured by that voice, but he cannot cut out the part of him that wants to.

"All-Might," he says, and his voice is steady.

His former partner goes quiet again for a moment. "*It's been a while,*" he says at length.

"Not that long," Nighteye says evenly.

"*R-right… right.*" All-Might clears his throat. "*Are you busy, at the moment?*"

"I'm always busy."

"*I would like to talk.*" He says it in a rush, as if he lacks the patience for small talk and politeness, and simply forces himself forward to reach

the endpoint as quickly as possible.

“I assumed so,” Nighteye replies. “Considering that you called me.”

“*I mean, in person,*” All-Might says. “*I would like to speak with you in person. At your convenience. I-if that’s all right, of course. I’m—I’m entirely at your disposal.*”

It’s been over six years, Nighteye realizes absently. They’ve been apart now for longer than they weren’t.

Out loud, he says, “Let me look at my schedule.”

The worst part of all of this is how quiet Eri is.

The nurse makes Izuku change out of his hero costume before he goes to see her. Thankfully he has a fresh change of clothes ready, on Togata’s advice—if the office medical staff think anything of him coming in wearing a faded All-Might hoodie, they don’t show it.

She hasn’t said much, not since creeping out of the corner she had crawled into, climbing into his lap, and clinging to a handful of his jacket while they continue her check-up. She offers no resistance, not even a squeak. A needle comes out to take a blood sample, her face turns pale, and Izuku is sure she’ll struggle. But instead, she closes her eyes and goes dead-still, accepting the poke without so much as a sound.

The doctors have been kind to her, of course. The first thing they did, before Izuku even got there, was give her a bath and a clean hospital gown. Their treatment of her speaks of gentle efficiency, and Izuku does his best, holding her and humming a nursery song he learned in kindergarten as the needle goes in and out. But Eri stays silent and still. No questions, no crying, nothing that a little girl her age might do during a check-up. Izuku keeps an eye on the flickering ghost, letting its frightened static wash over him as he watches for any sign of lucidity.

Eri’s eyes track the vial of blood the nurse carries away, then tugs at one of the strings dangling from his hood. When Izuku leans down, she whispers into his ear.

“*Tell them not to take too much.*”

He looks to the nearest nurse as she places a hot pink band-aid on the

spot where the needle went in. It's one spot of color amid the bandaging that covers most of her arms and legs. "Is that all the blood you're taking?"

She smiles at him kindly. "That's all. We just need to run a few tests." Reaching out, she gently brushes Eri's white hair out of her face and tucks it behind her ear. "Just need to make sure you aren't sick, dear. No more needles, unless it's to treat something nasty. I promise."

Instead of answering, Eri goes back to hiding her face. She tugs at Izuku again until he ducks down to hear her speak.

"*Is that really all?*"

"That's all the blood they need, I think," he whispers back.

"They can't take too much," she says. "He's not here. He can't fix me if they take too much."

Distantly, Izuku can hear Rei growling.

"Nobody's going to take too much of anything," he says. He's not really sure what he's saying. "You're safe now. No one's going to harm you." He realizes belatedly that that might not be a promise he should make; he has no idea how healthy Eri is, and if she isn't, he has no idea what it would take to make her better. "I mean, sometimes going to the doctor isn't fun. Like shots and stuff. But it's to make you healthy. No one's going to hurt you just to hurt you." He looks to Rei, who sits cross-legged on the nearest chair and watches Eri and the flickering ghost. "No one's going to hurt you to use you, either."

"They might," Eri says softly. "When they find out."

"Find out what?"

"I'm cursed." Some small, absurd part of him almost wants to laugh at that; that's something people joke about, being cursed. But this little girl says it like it's a fact as simple as the color of grass.

"Who told you that?" Izuku asks. "Was it Overhaul?" She nods. "Well, I'm sure he says a lot of things. My—my friend says Overhaul told him you were his daughter. Was that true?"

She looks up to stare at him, wide-eyed. She shakes her head.

"Well, there you are, then. Sounds to me like he's a big fat liar."

“No,” Eri says. “Not about that. He’s right. I’m cursed.” She’s trembling now, from the tip of her horn to the tips of her toes. “I have something. It’s in-inside me. And it’s bad, and it hurts people. Maybe it’ll hurt you too. I’m sorry. I’m s-*so-sorry.*” Her face crumples, fat tears rolling down as she ducks her head and curls in on herself again. “*I’m sorry, I’m sorry—*”

The nurse tuts and fusses, though with Eri clinging so closely to Izuku, there’s not much she can do besides push a box of tissues into his hands. Izuku casts a pleading look toward Rei, but he’s more or less alone in this.

“It’s okay—”

“You’re *nice*,” Eri whimpers. “You’re nice and I don’t want you to disappear and I don’t want him to find you and—”

“He won’t find me,” Izuku assures her, or he tries. “He never even saw me.”

“I don’t want you to disappear,” she tells him, her voice high and wracked with sobs. “I-I don’t want to—I don’t want—”

“I’m not going to disappear.” His voice doesn’t feel like his own. It’s like he’s standing back, watching someone else cradle this little girl and talk to her and brush a lock of hair behind her tiny horn. “Do you understand that, Eri? I might have to go away, but I’ll come back if you need me, because I’m a hero and that’s what heroes do. And if Overhaul comes looking for you—if he wants to take you back—” She flinches. “—he’s going to have to go through *me*.”

“He’ll kill you,” Eri tells him.

The smile takes over his face before Izuku realizes what he’s doing. “Do I look like the kind of guy who dies?”

There’s something about the way she looks at him, all wide wet eyes and gripping hands, curling into tight, tight fists in the sleeves of his jacket. He meant it at least partially as a joke, and she isn’t smiling but there’s something in her face now where there wasn’t before. He’s not sure what it is, just that it’s *something*, which means it’s different from the blank, frozen despair he’s been seeing until now. He hopes it’s a step in the right direction, and laments that ghosts are so much easier to read than living people.

Nearby, someone coughs in that awkward way that suggests they’re

trying to attract attention and avoid it at the same time. Izuku looks over, startled; how long has Togata been standing there? “Oh. Uh. Hi, senpai.”

“Hello, Midoriya! Sir said you’d be here.” Eri peeks at Togata curiously, and he offers a bright grin and a wave. “Hi there! Are you feeling better?”

Eri just stares at him, so Izuku jumps in to help. “That’s Lemillion. He’s a hero, too. Don’t worry, he’s nice. Senpai, this is Eri.”

Eri continues to watch Togata, which is probably a step up from constantly hiding her face. “What’s a hero?” she asks softly.

Togata launches into an enthusiastic and age-appropriate explanation, and Izuku takes the time to glance back at the flickering ghost. Rei has been sticking close to them lately, circling them but not in a hostile way. That’s why Izuku isn’t too worried by them; if Rei doesn’t find them threatening then there’s nothing to worry about.

In fact… he’s starting to see *something*. If he blinks too much then he misses it, but if he keeps his eyes open until they water, then he has a chance of catching it. Just a flash of something—an image in the shape of a human being.

“Anyway, I’m supposed to help you with your report,” Togata says, calling Izuku back into the conversation. “Whenever you’re up for it.”

“Oh.” Izuku glances down at Eri. She looks just a little less blank, a little less like she’ll fold back in on herself when he leaves the room. But still…

The nurse who put the bandaid on Eri’s arm smiles and pats his hand. “Don’t worry,” she assures him. “We’ll take good care of her. We can always call you back again if it’s needed.”

“All right,” he says, a little reluctantly. To Eri he says, “I have to go now. But I’ll be back—later. I’ll do my best, okay?”

She frowns, but nods and releases her hold on him. Izuku says his goodbyes to her and the medical team, and follows Togata out of the wing. Rei peels herself away from Eri and the flickering ghost to tag along.

Once they’re back in the hallway, Izuku’s conscience catches up to him. “I’m sorry,” he blurts. “For earlier, when I snapped. That was…”

“It’s all right,” Togata shoots him a rueful grin. “I mean, you did make a good point.”

“It’s still embarrassing…”

“It’s been a stressful day,” Togata says with a shrug, and that’s the end of it. “So anyway, intern paperwork is a little easier and less involved than it is for full-time sidekicks and heroes. I’m not looking forward to that myself come graduation, but it is what it is. The hardest part is writing up a detailed summary of what happened.”

Izuku tries to imagine summarizing the absolute heart-stabbing roller coaster of terror he just experienced. “Cool.”

There are blank forms at the receptionist’s desk, and a corner of the office set aside for interns and temporary employees to do busy work, which is currently unoccupied. Togata shows him both, guides him through which papers he’ll need to fill out, and is just about to sit down with him when his phone buzzes.

Togata winces and pulls it out of his pocket. “Ah, sorry, let me turn this off.”

“You can check it, if you want,” Izuku says as he fills out the basic information at the top of the form. “It might be important.”

“Nah, it’s just Tamaki,” Togata says. “We usually check in after… we…”

Izuku looks up as Togata’s voice trails off. He’s staring at his phone, face frozen in a half-formed frown. Rei, reading over his shoulder, lets out a distressed rattle.

His friend is hurt, she says. *The quiet one who doesn’t talk a lot. He’s in the hospital.*

“Go,” Izuku says. Togata startles at his voice. “You’re right, this looks pretty simple, so go ahead and check on—whatever it is. I’ll cover for you.” Togata looks conflicted, so Izuku presses. “Nighteye’ll understand.”

Togata’s face falters, and he offers a weak, wavering smile. “I think you might be right,” he says. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’ll be fine,” Izuku says with a smile. “If I mess it up, I’ll just say I blew you off and insisted on doing it myself. Just go.”

“I owe you one, Midoriya,” Togata says. With that, he hurries out of the office.

Once he’s gone, Izuku pulls out his own phone and picks one of his contacts, then keeps an ear out for people passing by as he waits for the call to go through. He doesn’t have long to wait; Iida usually picks up after the first ring.

“*Midoriya! It’s good to hear from you.*” Iida sounds a little out of breath. “*Are you all right? You’re out rather late—Kirishima came back, and from the sound of it he had quite the adventure today.*”

“Is he okay?” Izuku asks.

“*He got into a scuffle with some villains—something involving quirk-modifying drugs.*” Iida huffs. “*The nerve of some criminals.*”

Izuku’s mouth goes dry. “Hey, he’s interning at the same office as that guy from the Big Three, right? Amajiki-senpai? Is he okay too?”

“*Ah…*” Iida seems to waver for a moment. “From what I heard, he’s still in the hospital. Kirishima says… well, I’m not sure how much I’m supposed to say, but since you’ll be out in the field, you ought to be careful too. According to Kirishima, the criminals he faced were armed with quirk-nullifying bullets. He managed to avoid being hit, thanks to his own quirk, but Amajiki-senpai…”

Izuku breathes in sharply. Togata’s right to be worried, then. Quirk-nullifiers are temporary, thank goodness, but…

Overhaul’s supposed to have a hand in that, he remembers. *That’s what Nighteye said.*

“*Midoriya?*” Iida says. “*Are you all right?*”

“I’m fine,” he says. “Thanks for telling me, Iida. And—are you somewhere private right now? Could I ask a favor?” He lowers his voice, not wanting the office’s other occupants to hear.

“*Yes to both! What do you need?*”

“It’s kind of a gamble, but… just repeat something out loud for me, okay?”

“*Yes?*” Iida sounds confused.

“Say, ‘Midoriya needs a favor at Nighteye’s office.’”

"*…Oh! Right, Understood.*" Iida repeats the sentence. "*I-I'm… not sure if he's here, but…*"

"It's fine," Izuku says. "Like I said, it's a gamble, but—"

"You rang?" Tensei asks from two feet away. Izuku startles and knocks the pens off his desk.

"*Holy shit that was fast*—sorry, thanks, Iida!"

"I*t's no trouble at all!*"

They say their goodbyes and hang up, and Izuku puts his phone away while Tensei helpfully retrieves the pens.

"You said you needed a favor?" Tensei asks, stepping up to the desk.

"Yeah." Izuku pushes the empty form closer and offers a sheepish smile. "Show me how to fill out paperwork?"

They meet in the evening, on neutral ground. Toshinori isn't sure of a lot of things anymore, especially when it comes to Nighteye, but he knows it has to be neutral ground. If they meet at UA or at Nighteye's office, then they'll start off imbalanced, and that will defeat the whole purpose of this.

He picks a cat cafe. Let it not be said that he doesn't learn from Izuku just as much as Izuku learns from him, so he knows full well that cats are a great equalizer and icebreaker. It certainly doesn't hurt that Nighteye is fond of them, or that Aizawa possesses uncanny knowledge of every cat cafe in Musutafu. His colleague says that this particular establishment is known for discretion, very small crowds, and private corner booths, all of which are a blessing. Public space is the only viable neutral ground, but it's good to limit the number of eyes on them.

Toshinori is there first, of course—nearly an hour before the appointed time, because Nighteye likes to be early to meetings, and because he needs the time to pet a few cats for courage. He ends up somewhat regretting that when the door opens, bell chiming overhead, and his former friend and partner walks in to find him with two cats in his lap, one more draped about his shoulders, and a fourth dangling from both hands.

For a moment the two of them stare at each other. It occurs to

Toshinori that this is probably an important moment. It's not the first time they've spoken in six years, but it is the first time they've been in the same room, and he ought to say or do something appropriate for the occasion.

He glances at the cat in the hands, then back at Nighteye. "This one's called Sprinkles," he says.

Nighteye sighs deeply, and—that's almost familiar, that sigh. It's got a touch more exasperation and a touch less fondness than he remembers, but it's there and it feels like an olive branch—or an acceptance of the olive branch that Toshinori himself offered. Either way, Nighteye sits down across from Toshinori, which is quite a bit better than he feared.

"I wasn't sure you'd come," he says, looking away as he places the cat down on the floor.

One of Nighteye's eyebrows twitches. "I tried to picture the sort of scenario that would compel you to contact *me* for a meeting. I couldn't think of anything short of a disaster, so I came straight away."

"Ah, well…"

"That, or drastic climate change," Nighteye continues. "In hell, specifically."

Toshinori sighs.

"I would like to… not argue with you, to start," he says. "I think we've done quite enough of that recently, and… and less recently. So I'd like to avoid it entirely, at least for now. I know it's not possible in the long run. I know that—that we've had disagreements that were never resolved, and they won't go away just because I wish them to. But, for now…" He pauses to nudge a venturesome tabby away from his tea. "How have you been, Nighteye? The world has been changing lately. Are you doing all right in it?"

"Really?" Nighteye's eyes narrow in confusion. "You called me here for small talk?"

Toshinori strokes the silver tabby's head. "That is what old friends and coworkers do, isn't it? Meet for coffee? Catch up?"

Nighteye spends a moment staring at him. "You're not even drinking coffee," he points out.

“I’m afraid not. It’s bad for my stomach.” He tries not to wince. “My stomach in the figurative sense, that is. But I have it on good authority that it’s excellent.”

Nighteye blinks, hesitates, then turns around to flag down a server and order one. It’s a start.

“The work never ends, of course,” he says. “All For One is gone, but there are many enterprising villains seeking to take his place. But that was always going to be the case, regardless of whether or not you could help fight them. We always knew that.”

“You always knew that,” Toshinori says quietly. “I didn’t want to believe you.”

“Well, you were always the idealist.” Nighteye’s coffee comes, and he accepts it with a nod of thanks. “Not that that was ever a mark against you. I appreciated that. I could never see the world the way you did, no matter how much I wanted to. Working with you made it easier to see the bright side of things.”

I can’t anymore, he doesn’t say, though Toshinori can read it in the air between them. *I’ve lost that bright side.*

“All in all, I’d say about a dozen different criminal warlords are vying to fill the void that All For One left,” Nighteye continues. “A handful pose a real threat. I’m only focusing on one for now.”

“Yes, I heard it’s been an eventful day in Musutafu,” Toshinori says. The tortoiseshell in his lap jumps down and approaches Nighteye to wind around his ankles. Nervousness tickles the back of his throat, but he takes the plunge anyway. “Young Izuku has been rather tight-lipped among his classmates, so I assume it was something important.”

Nighteye stiffens, and Toshinori takes a sip of tea to hide his nervousness. He knows full well this is unstable ground. But a moment later, Nighteye shrugs off the tension and clears his throat. “Yes. His first day of patrol was a bit more eventful than I expected. But it was… fruitful.”

“Good,” Toshinori says steadily. “I’m glad he’s doing well.”

The silence that follows that is awkward and tense and stretches far too long for his liking. It could be worse; the background noise of paws and purring keeps it from being too oppressive, but it’s still the opposite of talking, which is what Toshinori wants out of this.

“You might as well say it,” he says. “Whatever is on your mind, whatever you’re holding back right now. We’re never going to get anywhere if you don’t.”

“You said you didn’t want to argue,” Nighteye says.

“I also said it wasn’t possible in the long run. If we keep dancing around uncomfortable things, we’ll be going in circles for the rest of our lives.” That makes Nighteye wince; he probably could have worded it better, but maybe a little discomfort will move things forward.

“You know I have misgivings about him,” Nighteye tells him.

Protective instincts tie his chest in knots, but Toshinori keeps his voice steady. “Yes, I know. You made that much clear, the last time we spoke.”

“Let me be clearer,” Nighteye continues. “As a potential hero, I’m impressed with his abilities. He’s formidable. He has good instincts. But not every good hero is worthy of One For All—”

“And what makes *you* so much better at deciding who is?” Immediately he bites tongue. The last thing he wants to do is lose his temper so easily.

Nighteye is about to reply when the enterprising tortoiseshell leaps up into his lap, cutting off whatever retort was on the tip of his tongue. Instead he sighs, harsh and irritated but still calm. “You’re impulsive. You always have been. And maybe it’s because it’s saved your life in combat. Maybe you’re so used to hearing the future from me that you forget to think about it for yourself. I don’t know. But—” He pauses, mouth twisting. “I just don’t feel it’s a decision to be made lightly.”

“I don’t understand why you think I did.”

“Because you *always* do.” Nighteye puts his cup down. “Even when I was there to give you advice, you did. Even when I spelled out your *death*, you refused to stop and think of what that meant or how to prepare for it—”

“I’m not going to prepare for it because I’m not going to die, Nighteye.” It comes out harsher than he wants it to, but it’s the truth. “Not this year, and not the next. I know you have faith in your visions, and I understand your convictions, but I survived Kamino, I survived All For One *twice*, and I will survive whatever future you foresaw.”

Nighteye is staring again, eyes widening so slightly that most people wouldn't notice the difference. But Toshinori is not most people. "I'm not going to die. Not when I have so much left to do."

The staring continues, to the point where it almost becomes awkward. And while part of Toshinori is glad of this, glad that he surprised Nighteye when so little catches him off guard, Nighteye's staring hasn't gotten any less disconcerting with time. Not even the tortoiseshell in his lap is enough to soften the intensity of it.

"Where was this drive six years ago?" Nighteye asks bluntly.

Toshinori blinks. "What?"

"It's a simple question," Nighteye says. There's a tremor in his voice now, and Toshinori isn't sure what it means. "I asked you to fight with me then—I *begged* you."

Toshinori shakes his head. "You asked me to give up and turn my back on a world that still needed me," he says. "You didn't ask me to fight, you asked me to *stop* fighting—"

"I'm not talking about villains," Nighteye cuts him off. "I was asking you, years ago, to fight against the fate I foresaw for you, and you told me no, All-Might." His hands shake until they curl around the cup again. "I was asking you to fight for yourself for once, for the people who cared about you, and *you walked away*."

His heart sinks. He wonders why he never thought of it that way, when he thought he knew Nighteye so well. "…I'm sorry. I know I can't change that. I wish I could, because I know better, now, and I know—I know that I need help." This is the hard part, the uncomfortable part. The part that he's been dreading and putting off since Kamino, maybe even before then, because he knows how likely it is that he's going to hear a *no*. "The things that are left for me to do—I can't do them alone. I know now that I can't just keep people at a distance and shoulder everything myself. So I don't know if you're still willing to help me, after all these years, but—"

"I have *been* willing," Nighteye says coldly.

Toshinori actually jumps. He hasn't heard that tone from Nighteye in… ever. Nighteye lets his composure crack when he's upset. His anger runs hot, not cold.

Nighteye is staring at him, his expression shifting through several in a

row—anger, confusion, indignation, hurt. “What… what is that supposed to mean, All-Might? *You don’t know if I’m*—” He cuts himself off, pressing his lips together as he looks away.

“It’s been years, Nighteye,” Toshinori says softly. “I couldn’t just assume that you’d—”

“I already did.” The tremor in his voice is back. “I *already*— I tried already, Yagi. I reached out, and I tried to help, and you made yourself quite clear on what you thought of it.”

“I don’t—”

“I had a candidate for you. I found someone who I thought might be worthy, and I—five years of nothing, and I wanted to help you again. You were the one confided in me about your power, and what you would eventually have to do with it; did you think I’d forget, after we spent hours talking about it back then? Why else do you think I reached out? I saw my chance to be useful to you again, and you never even bothered to see what I had to show for it. You never bothered to meet him, or ask for my opinion, or just—just *talk* to me.” His voice cracks, like it did six years ago. “I’m not a fool, All-Might. I can take a hint. You made yourself perfectly clear with your silence, just as you made yourself perfectly clear by walking away when I asked you to help me save you.”

He stops then, hands curled into fists on the table. The cats have abandoned him, driven away by the raw tension that rings in very quiet word.

“…So don’t tell me you don’t know if I’m still willing to help you,” he says, eyes fixed on the table in front of him. “I’m *trying*. I have *been* trying. You can’t blame me for taking no for an answer.”

Nighteye seems to droop after he says this, as if all the energy has left him after letting out the harsh words locked inside of him. He all but slumps over the table, forehead in hand, toying with the handle of his coffee cup. It’s hard to read his face at the best of times, much less this half-hidden angle, but Toshinori sees the dip of his brow and the tight line of his mouth, and it’s like reading a half-forgotten language.

“I’m sorry,” he says softly. “I don’t know what else to say.”

“Why did you call me here, All-Might?” Nighteye asks wearily. “What is it you really want?”

“I’m worried,” Toshinori replies.

He doesn’t raise his head. “About what?”

“That you’re letting the bad blood between us color how you see Izuku.”

Nighteye stiffens, and it might be the wrong thing to say or the wrong way to say it, but it’s the truth, and it’s the real reason that Toshinori is here. “I’m not. If anything, it’s the opposite.”

“What do you mean the opposite?”

“I mean that I respect you,” Nighteye says bluntly. “I mean that regardless of the bad blood between us, I have always respected you, and I have always believed in what you built, and what you stood for, and what All-Might represented. And Midoriya… he’ll be a capable hero. I’m sure of it. But he can’t be what you were. He can’t be the All-Might that the world needs. He doesn't even seem to want try—”

“And you think that’s a mark against him?” Toshinori interrupts. “It’s not. Nighteye, I don’t *want* him to be what I was. I wouldn’t wish that on anyone, and if you care about Togata Mirio then you wouldn’t wish it on him either.”

Nighteye bridles, eyes glinting with anger. “Do *not* bring that into question—”

“I walked away six years ago because I was trying to be the All-Might that the world needed. You do understand that, don’t you? That wasn’t just a flaw in my character, it was a flaw in *All-Might*. And you’ve seen what the world is like, now that the pillar is gone. Villains fighting for dominance, heroes fighting to keep the streets safe—” Toshinori stops. “It was never going to last, Nighteye. I might not have foresight, but I do have hindsight, and I can see how fragile it was. Maybe having a Symbol of Peace was good for fixing a broken world, but… it was never going to maintain it.”

“But—still,” Nighteye insists. “He possesses the world’s single most powerful quirk, alongside the one he was born with. Symbol or not, that’s hardly meaningless.”

“Of course it isn’t meaningless,” Toshinori says. “I never said it was meaningless. All I’m saying is… *what* it means isn’t up to me, because I don’t have it anymore. It’s gone. It’s his. One For All is his quirk, and what he does with it isn’t for either of us to decide.”

Nighteye stares at him for a moment more, and it's enough to know that Toshinori hasn't quite gotten through to him. He keeps searching those eyes and that face, and he sees enough to know that Nighteye is *frustrated* above all else, and Toshinori wishes he knew how to reassure him. But before he can think of what else to say, Nighteye pushes aside his empty cup, pulls out his wallet, and puts down enough money to pay for both of their drinks.

"Thank you for the invitation," he says, but that's not what he means, so Toshinori shoos the cats out of his lap and follows him out.

"Does it matter that much to you?" he asks, once they're out on the street and away from prying eyes and ears. "What happens to One For All?"

"Of course it matters," Nighteye retorts.

"I just don't understand why you keep insisting it's about Izuku when it's clearly not," Toshinori presses. Nighteye stops short, but doesn't turn back to look at him. "I hurt you. I understand that. You were afraid for me and you wanted to do everything you could to help me, and I shut you out. That was wrong of me, and I want to make amends for it, but I can't do that if you keep making it about him."

"It is about him," Nighteye says. He still won't look back. "I know about his power. Do you really think someone so accustomed to death should be wielding the most powerful quirk in the world?"

"I have never met *anyone* more determined to save lives than Izuku," Toshinori says sharply. "And besides—One For All wasn't created to lift up the world, it was created to bring down All For One. All For One is dead now. Its old purpose is lost." He pauses. "Is that why you're upset? Because the future is so uncertain? Just because your quirk lets you see what comes next doesn't mean—"

In an instant Nighteye rounds on him, cutting him off before he can finish.

"I'm upset that you chose a successor that has *so much less* to lose if you die, Toshinori! Why is that so confusing?"

The words wither away on Toshinori's tongue.

"For a boy who's grown up seeing ghosts, and talks to them like it's *nothing*—" Nighteye's voice breaks. "Whether your death comes to pass or not… what difference will it make to him? You told me about

Shimura Nana, you told me about what it was like to lose her, how you would have fought anyone and sacrificed anything to get her back for just one day… and you think it doesn't *upset* me that your student never has to fear that kind of pain?"

And once again, Toshinori can only stare. He tries to remember when he last saw Nighteye cry. It's not easy—but if he doesn't push, if he lets memories drift to him instead of seeking them out, he remembers lingering flashes of fluorescent lights and hospital bedding and two hands grasping one of his—but then he woke up and recovered enough to stand up and walk and fight again, everything went wrong, and he never got the chance to ask if they were dreams or not.

It's been six years now and all of his memories are like that, drifting in without him calling on them, reminding him that the man before him says things that mean others. That language used to fall upon his ears effortlessly, but now it comes back to him piece by piece. It's just enough to understand now, that *You're impulsive* means *Let me help,* that *I'm trying, I have been trying* means *I miss you,* and that *it upsets me* means *I'm scared, more scared than I have ever been*.

He's starting to wonder if it really is too late, if this bridge is just too thoroughly burned now to be fixed or rebuilt. He can try, but if there's one thing Izuku and young Bakugou have taught him, it's that there's only so much he can do when connections between people run both ways.

But he does know this: he knows he can't do it today. He can try again, just not today.

"You… don't understand him," he says quietly. "You don't understand him at all. I just wish you'd try, because—there's a reason he came to you. There's something he needs that I can't give him, but you can. I don't know what it is. You'll have to ask him yourself."

He turns to leave, but there's one more thing he needs to say, one more clump of words that Nighteye's fears have dragged from within him.

"And… for the record, I did." Nighteye blinks at him, confused, and Toshinori continues before he can lose his nerve. "I did get her back. Nana, I mean. Except I didn't have to fight anyone, or sacrifice anything. I just had to put my faith in one boy." Slowly, he lets out a breath. "He saved me, you know. I think, if it hadn't been for him, that fate you saw would have caught up to me in Kamino."

Nighteye doesn't answer.

"Until later, Mirai," Toshinori says. It's more than he gave him six years ago, as he walked away—limped away—down a quiet hospital hallway and didn't look back. But it's not a goodbye.

Toshinori is tired of goodbyes.

Chapter End Notes

> Content warning: Discussions of child kidnapping, abuse, and murder; implied medical trauma.

Chapter 53

Chapter Notes

Thanks for all the art!

nagareboshi22

nanigives

temptationfandom

rune-ined

tamlins-stories-and-poems

astronautgeckos

darbile

deadanddrawing

littleinni

samisnotlegend

peachie5000

glowingorange

oo-snowflakes-oo

itzcrystalieh

sleepingpastnoon

rennskye

oneplotthickens

theblukittu

As always, this story has a TV Tropes page!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shouta's dreams are troubled.

This is nothing new, of course. He's a hero, and more to the point, he's an underground hero. If he's sleeping soundly without the help of anesthesia, then he's not working hard enough.

It's gotten worse since Kamino. You'd think the defeat and demise of one of the darkest villains in Japan's history would ease the nightmares just a little, but you'd be wrong. The power vacuum left in the shadowy criminal underworld is nearly matched by the one left in the brightly lit world of heroics; both make for uncertain times, and uncertain times make for uneasy dreams. (The dorm situation doesn't help, with the security system blipping him every time one of the kids gets up for a cup of tea at three in the morning.)

It doesn't help that he almost lost students that night. It doesn't help that Bakugou Katsuki only just let out a throbbing mass of ugliness that Shouta had failed to notice building up. It doesn't help that a handful of his students have already headed out for internships, out into that unstable ticking time bomb of a world, while all Shouta can do is dither in a classroom, hope to hell he trained them well enough to keep them alive, and try not to think about the look on Midoriya Izuku's face when he'd found him pale and traumatized in a hospital room just outside of Kamino.

It certainly doesn't help that Midoriya is one of those students, and that he's managed to land on the exact same case Shouta has been working since the dust settled in Kamino Ward.

Except…

Except it sort of does.

It does help, thinking of that—and that is saying something, because the Eight Precepts case has been a feature of more than a few of his recent night terrors. The ones with kids in them always stir up that visceral horror.

But for some reason, some baffling, paradoxical reason, the fact that his class's biggest problem child has bulled his way into this one settles it. Not completely—just enough to be noticeable. Just enough to make Shouta wonder why.

"Good news, guys!" Kirishima pipes up at the end of the day. "Amajiki-senpai's gonna be okay! Apparently the anti-quirk serum in those bullets was temporary."

“Y’know, you’re insanely lucky *you* didn’t get hit by one of those things yourself,” Kaminari points out.

“Are you stupid?” Bakugou snaps. “It wasn’t *luck*. His quirk makes shitty tricks like that worthless against him, and since he’s not dumb enough not to use it, there was never gonna be a chance. Use your goddamn brain once in a while.”

Shouto turns to Midoriya to comment on it, to find his friend thoroughly engrossed in his phone. “It’s so weird,” Midoriya remarks, without looking up. “A year ago I never would’ve thought Bakugou was capable of complimenting anyone.”

“Well, people change,” Shouto points out. “Who’re you texting?”

“Togata-senpai. Just confirming.” Midoriya reads something on his screen and smiles. “Yeah, Amajiki’s out of the hospital, good as new. Guess we still have time after all.”

Shouto blinks. “Time for what?”

Instead of answering, Midoriya gives a muffled yelp of pain and rubs at his arm. “Nothing. Sorry, I forgot I’m not supposed to—um. Never mind. Forget I said anything.”

“If you say so,” Shouto says, burying his disappointment. It’s a little alarming, how accustomed he’s become to sharing things and having things shared with him. So accustomed, apparently, that getting brushed off is suddenly jarring.

“It’s, um, an internship thing,” Midoriya says, as if sensing his discomfort. “Sorry, I—”

“No, it’s fine,” Shouto says. “It’s all right. Really.” Eager to change the subject, he presses forward. “Want to study together? I missed Cementoss covering the last two chapters yesterday, and Iida said he’d share notes.”

He gets a weak, guilty smile for that—and Shouto isn’t sure if Midoriya’s guilty for letting something slip before cutting him off, or if he still blames himself for Shouto failing the exam and therefore falling behind. Which is absurd—if he’d passed, he would have taken on an internship and ended up behind anyway.

Before Midoriya can reply, Aizawa steps in to intercept them. He acknowledges Shouto with a nod before turning to Midoriya. “Your

supervisor contacted me," he says. "You're needed for a few hours."

Midoriya hesitates. "Do I need my gear?"

"No. Just a chaperone."

"*Oh*. Right, okay." Midoriya stands straighter, as if the fact that his internship supervisor needs him for something other than field work means something significant. "I, uh… gotta go, Todoroki." There's an apology in his tone, but Shouto can tell from the look in his eyes that there are places he'd rather be than studying in the dorms.

"Later, then," Shouto says, and Midoriya follows Aizawa at a quick pace.

He returns in the early evening, slipping silently into the study group that that started with Shouto and Uraraka and expanded to include Asui, Tokoyami, and Iida. He smiles in greeting and neatly dodges questions about where he's been.

From there, classes continue as usual, or as usual as they can when a handful of students can't always be present for them. Shouto misses quite a few himself for remedial training, which leaves him tired each day with fresh cuts and bruises.

Midoriya's work with Nighteye's agency continues, and he talks about it as much as he's allowed. From what Shouto can tell, it mostly consists of patrols with Togata and agency staff meetings he has to sit in on, which more or less matches what the others with internships have on their plates. On one occasion Midoriya gets a brief mention in the news when he shows up with the hero Centipeder at an armed robbery in the area—though that's swiftly overshadowed by Tokoyami's work with Hawks.

The only odd thing about Midoriya's internship is the fact that he keeps disappearing for a few hours after school. Shouto can tell this is odd because none of the others with internships do that, and because they all wonder about it too. When asked, Midoriya smiles and shrugs it off with some excuse about reports and follow-ups and other things that take significantly less time than three hours.

Shouto doesn't know much, beyond the fact that Aizawa usually chaperones him to leave campus, and sometimes Togata is the one to come fetch him. And the fact that Midoriya never, ever takes his costume and support gear with him on these outings.

“I’m sure he’d take it if he needed it,” Uraraka says one Tuesday afternoon, after Shouto brings it up. “Especially now that he’s sort of allowed to use it in public.”

“In any case Aizawa-sensei’s usually with him,” Iida adds. “And if not, his supervisor is. I’m sure it’s perfectly safe, and even if it wasn’t, he’s not alone.”

They’re in Iida’s room, and no one else is with them, so there’s no harm in Uraraka saying, “Not that he would be anyway. He’s never alone, remember?”

Shouto purses his lips, wondering if he should point out that ghosts didn’t prevent Midoriya from being taken by the League.

In spite of his silence, Uraraka seems to read his thoughts on his face. “You know, you could just tell him you’re worried about him. You guys share everything with each other, right?” She waggles her eyebrows like it’s a joke, which makes no sense because it’s almost true.

“Not everything,” Shouto says. “Especially not now—since he’s out working real missions, there are a lot of things he *can’t* tell me. And besides, how I feel about it is my problem, not his. He has enough on his plate without having to worry about my feelings.”

The room goes quiet for a while, aside from the scratching of pencils. It’s Iida who clears his throat and tries to shift things again. “Well, speaking of having things on our plates, how is your own training coming along? You’ve clearly been working hard.”

“Is it true that Gang Orca’s been helping train you?” Uraraka asks, jumping on this new thread. “What’s he like as a teacher?”

Shouto purses his lips and tries not to cringe. As the hero in charge of conducting the exams, assessing the students, and therefore failing most of them, Gang Orca has been a frequent and active overseer in remedial training. “He was like a drill sergeant, at first. He’s eased up a little, but he’s still strict.”

“That sounds tough,” Uraraka says.

“It’s not, really…” Shouto’s voice trails off.

“You’ve come back looking more battered than normal,” Iida says carefully. “So he must at least be tougher than Aizawa-sensei.”

“I guess.”

Uraraka makes a strangled noise. “Urfh, I can’t even *imagine* that.”

And the problem is, Shouto can. He can imagine a tougher teacher than Aizawa, and he can imagine a tougher teacher than Gang Orca—

But he’s not sure he can say that out loud, because the only person outside of his family who has an inkling of *why* is Midoriya. Midoriya, who probably knows more than even Shouto has told him, because apparently he’s been talking to ghosts about it.

“But—but wait,” Uraraka says. “It can’t just be about fighting, can it? Because—well, honestly? You’re a better fighter than most of the class, and… if passing the exams was all about how good you are at fighting, then it wouldn’t really make sense for them to have higher standards in remedial training than they did in the actual exam.”

“You’re right,” Shouto says. “They don’t. It’s not—it’s not about physical abilities. I’ve been fine with combat training. It might look bad when I come back, but that part is simple.”

“Well, that’s good, then.” Iida’s tone is encouraging. “It’s good to have something you excel at.”

Shouto shuts his eyes.

“ Hopeless,” Gang Orca scoffed. “Absolutely hopeless.”

“I had the second best time out of everyone here,” Shouto pointed out.

“I’ll say you did—here being remedial training. And you might’ve been fast, but you were sloppy. Not so much to brag about after all, hm?”

“I don’t know why you’re complaining,” Shouto gritted out before he could stop himself. “You were the one who told me to run the course. You were the one who decided to time it.” Orca rounded on him, wide mouth opening, and Shouto braced himself to ride out another tirade.

But instead, the hero closed his mouth, pulled back, and seemed to consider him for a moment. It wasn’t until Shouto’s spine lost its tension that he spoke again. “Is that what you think you’re here for, kid?” he asked, his voice gruff but less of a shout. “Doing as you’re told?”

Shouto blinked, confused by the question. “I mean—” He hesitated. “What else is there? That’s what you’re here for.”

*"*Wrong*," Orca said. "I'm not here to tell you what to do, I'm here to* teach *ya."*

"Is there a difference?" Shouto asked dryly.

"You think there's no difference?" Orca didn't have eyebrows, but his tone gave the impression that he'd be raising one if he did. "You think you're here to follow orders? Tell me then—if I trotted out a line of rowdy kindergartners and told you to give each one a sock in the mouth, what would you do?"

Shouto stared at him. "I'd… probably try to figure out what you actually *wanted from me."*

Orca barked out a laugh. "Good answer. So, now that we've established that you ain't here to jump when I tell ya—why are you here, then?"

"So I can pass the exams in spring," Shouto answered readily.

"Why?" Gang Orca asked.

"To… get my provisional license?"

"Are you asking me or telling me? Why?"

Shouto frowned. "So I can catch up to my classmates."

The hero nodded. "Why?"

Shouto's draining patience almost ran out then and there. "Because I'm trying to be a hero."

"Why?"

"I don't—" Shouto sighed sharply. "That's why everyone's here, isn't it? To become a hero? I don't know what else you want from me."

"And finally we have our problem!" Gang Orca spread his arms wide. "'Cos when you get right down to it, you don't know, do you? And that right there—that's why you're sloppy. That's why nobody knows what the hell we're supposed to do with you. 'Cos at this point, you *don't even know. Either none of this matters to you, or you can't figure out why it should. You want to be a hero—that's fine, but why? Trying to make daddy proud?"*

*The tension snapped back into place. "*No*."*

“All right then,” Orca said, raising his hands in a placating manner. “Fair enough, didn’t mean to touch a nerve. But here’s a bit of homework for you —and I’m gonna have words with Eraserhead so he makes sure you do it. Over the next couple weeks, I want you to think on that. Think on why. *‘Cos I want you to figure out just what the hell you’re doing here and why it matters so much to you. And if you can’t think of anything, well, then maybe you ought to think about whether or not you should be here at all.”*

“—Todoroki? Hey, did you fall asleep?”

“No,” Shouto says, opening his eyes. “Just thinking. About training.”

“You know, there is something you should keep in mind,” Uraraka points out. “You basically failed on a technicality. You literally got sabotaged. As long as villains don’t crash the make-up exams, I don’t think you have anything to worry about.”

“Regardless, if there’s one thing you’ve proven, it’s that you’re strong,” Iida says. “If you keep cultivating that strength, then Uraraka’s right—you have more than what it takes.”

Shouto nods, but he’s not sure he believes it. He’s almost sure that he could become a hero on strength alone, but he’s a lot less sure that he would want to.

After all, if combat skill is his only saving grace, then what difference would there be between him and Endeavor?

It takes almost two weeks, but the wait is worth it.

Eri talks now. Not that she was mute before, but she’s starting to speak first instead of wait to be spoken to. The nurses read her stories and let her watch cartoons, and sometimes she’ll tell Izuku about them when he comes by. Sometimes she’ll ask for stories, or for pictures of his cat, and he’ll provide them to the best of his ability. Sometimes Togata is there too, and he’ll listen intently to everything Eri says and, if asked, regale them both with stories about what he and Amajiki got up to when they were little kids.

Their role is fairly simple: since they both worked together to rescue her, Eri has latched on to them as a safe place—Izuku especially. So he visits to help keep her calm and comfortable, and to observe her progress and report back to Nighteye. She’s been through a lot of tests, evaluations, and minor medical procedures since coming here, partly to treat the health problems from her imprisonment, but also to try

and figure out exactly what happened to her. The nurses say his visits keep her from panicking at the sight of a stethoscope.

But Eri isn't the only reason Izuku keeps coming back. Day by day, piece by piece, the ghost who hovers close to her starts coming together. He—it's a he—is every bit as skittish, elusive, and incoherent as Izuku expects. He speaks little, whispers to Eri at volumes that Izuku can barely hear, and vanishes whenever he catches Izuku staring.

Today, Izuku finds him sitting by Eri, watching her look at the pictures in a book. His form is clearer than it was yesterday. He's a man in his thirties with pale, wavy hair, and a face that—if Izuku looks carefully—has a few notes in common with Eri. He's almost definitely a relative, and possibly her real father.

Izuku is careful not to look at him as he walks in and sits down. Rei, on the other hand, plops down near him and crosses her legs, watching Eri with him. Out of the corner of his eye he sees the ghost hesitate, hand wringing in midair, before finally reaching out to pat Rei's hair. Rei beams. It's progress.

"They gave me books," Eri says. "Sometimes they read to me. But there's lots of pictures."

"What's that one?" Izuku asks. From what he can tell it's a kid's book about rainforests. Eri is currently engrossed in a photograph of a bright green tree frog. "Oh, that one reminds me of one of my friends. She's sort of froggy—she can jump like one, and she's got a long tongue."

Eri looks up, wide-eyed. "How long?"

"Well, if she was sitting with us, right here, she could reach that wall with it, easy." Izuku points. Eri looks. "It's really strong, too. One time she picked me up with it."

With a nod, Eri turns back to the frog picture and runs her finger over it, pausing on its bright red eyes. "It has eyes like me," she says.

"So it does." He reads the caption beneath the picture. "It's called a red-eyed tree frog, actually."

Eri gives a soft *oh*. She turns the page, and gasps softly at the three-toed sloth she finds. With one eye on the ghosts, Izuku scoots closer and softly reads to her from the page. Eri absorbs it quietly, face

solemn, as if the fact that sloths move so slowly that moss grows on their fur is of the utmost importance to her. Izuku hears the ghost mutter something and shift.

After a little while of looking at books, Eri tugs on his sleeve. “I have to get a shot,” she says.

Izuku tries not to wince. It’s inevitable, since Eri’s past imprisonment means she’s not vaccinated. But shots mean needles, and Eri looks at needles the way most people would look at live grenades. “Oh, that’s not fun. I’ve had shots before.”

“They said they have to poke,” Eri says. “You told them, right? You told them not to take too much?”

“They won’t take anything at all,” Izuku assures her. “Shots aren’t to take blood. They’re to keep you from getting sick. Promise. I’ve had them, and I’ll have to have more eventually.” Eri doesn’t seem convinced. “I’ll come with you. If it gets scary you can look away. I bet if we ask, they’ll let us bring the book.”

She’s calm when the nurses come to take them into a different room, and true to Izuku’s word they let her bring the book. Eri watches in silence as one of the nurse explains vaccines in simple terms, then turns away to look at monkeys when the needle goes in. It’s the same as always—she doesn’t flinch or wriggle or cry. She goes still and limp under Izuku’s arm, shutting her eyes until it’s over.

“Do shots help curses?” she asks afterward. The ghost shudders and makes a distressed noise.

“Not that I know of,” Izuku says. She looks crestfallen. “But you wouldn’t need one of those. You’re a little sick, but you’re not cursed.”

“He said I was,” she tells him, looking him in the eye. “He said I was cursed, and—and he was *smart*. He knew things.”

“Overhaul?”

She nods. “He was a doctor too. With—with the mask, and the needles, and—” Her hands grasp at his shirt, shaking as they squeeze into fists. “I’m cursed. All I do is hurt people. He *said*.”

“I know. I believe you. But Eri—” Izuku holds her hands. “That’s not true. Just because he said so doesn’t mean it’s true. Sometimes—” He pauses. “Sometimes, bad people say things that aren’t true.” She

sniffles. “It’s not that they’re wrong, or that they’re not smart. It’s that they lie.”

“Why?” she whispers.

“Lots of reasons. Sometimes it’s to scare us. One time—” His throat nearly squeezes itself shut. “One time, someone tried to lie to me like that. Because he wanted something from me, but he couldn’t just take it, so he tried to make me choose to help him.”

“Did it work?” she asks.

Izuku swallows painfully. “No. It—it could’ve. I had help. I wasn’t alone.”

“Oh.” She sniffles again. “He took—he took. It hurt.”

This is important. He’s not sure what it means, but he has a feeling Nighteye will want to know about it. For now, though, he hugs her close. “It’s okay. It’s not your fault. You were alone, and he used you, and that was wrong of him, and *you are not cursed*. He was wrong.”

Her voice is muffled into his chest. “You don’t know that.”

“I do,” he says. “I’ve met people like that. I’ve met the people they hurt to get what they want. I know whose fault it is, and it’s not yours.”

“I don’t want to hurt you,” Eri tells him.

“You won’t.”

“I don’t want him to hurt you.”

Izuku grinds his teeth. “He won’t.”

At this, Eri pushes back from him. Her face is shiny with tears. “He will,” she says. “If he finds me, he will.”

“Eri—”

“He’ll take you apart. And he won’t—he won’t put you back together, not like me.”

Izuku goes cold. Nearby, the ghost lets out a choked sob.

“Eri—” His voice catches. “Eri, are you saying he’s… taken you apart?

And put you back together?"

It takes a long while for Eri to finally nod. "Th-that's why—you can't let them take too much," she says. "When he takes too much, he takes me apart, and puts me back together. Y-you—they can't. They can't put me back together here. Not like him."

"*No!*"

Izuku jumps, not just because of the sharp cry, but because there are hands on him, fingers digging into his shoulders hard enough to bruise. In a few minutes he'll worry about whether or not he spooked Eri by twitching like that, but for now, the ghost that follows her is taking up all of his attention.

"Don't let him touch her." Izuku can't see his eyes, but the rest of his pallid face is twisted with horror. "Don't let him—*please*. H-he wants her quirk, and you don't know. *You don't know what he's done!*"

He only lets go when Rei drags him back. Izuku blinks his watering eyes, and both ghosts are gone when he opens them.

It's nearly half past five when Eri starts to droop sleepily, and Izuku's visit ends. Reluctantly he leaves her in the care of nurses and makes his way back to Nighteye's office. Rei rejoins him on the way, but the ghost that follows Eri is nowhere to be seen.

"Did he tell you anything?" Izuku asks.

Rei scowls, then sticks out her tongue and twirls her finger by her ear.

"That's mean," he chides her, and Rei kicks a pebble and sends it skittering down the sidewalk. "We don't know what he's been through, or how he died. We don't know *anything*." It comes out more forceful and irritable than he likes.

After a moment, Rei slips her hand into his and squeezes.

"I don't want to lose her," Izuku says quietly. "Overhaul's still out there and we don't know what he wants, or why he wants her. She's scared and she doesn't trust anything and I just *know* she doesn't believe me when I tell her no one's going to hurt her." His voice cracks. "We got her out, we got her away from him, but what good is that if she's still trapped and scared and—"

Another squeeze.

“I don’t know what else to do,” he says. “I don’t know how else I can help her.”

Rei points ahead, to the front door of Nighteye’s agency. She points forcefully, jabbing her finger in midair, then lets go of his hand so she can mime glasses over her eyes and pull an exaggerated long face.

In spite of himself, Izuku laughs. “Okay, okay, I get your point. You’re right. Nighteye’ll know what to do with all of this.” He takes a deep breath, then lets it out. “Just wish I had more to give him. Maybe Eri’s ghost will be more clear-headed tomorrow. Knowing that Overhaul wants her quirk is something, but it’d be nice to know what her quirk actually is.”

By the time he gives Nighteye his report, he’s composed himself. He finishes quickly, then meets up with Togata to head back to UA.

Unfortunately, Iida is busy corralling some of their classmates in the kitchen when Izuku gets back, but luckily Todoroki has a copy of his notes from Cementoss’s class. Iida’s notes are always neat, organized, and comprehensive; reading them is as good as sitting through the actual class. It’s also nice to unwind and think of other things for a while. His cryptic conversation with Eri still sticks in his mind, and Todoroki’s calm presence helps him bounce back faster.

As they pass the evening in Izuku’s room, Todoroki is quieter than usual. It’s not a calm sort of quiet; if Izuku were to call it anything, he would probably pick “morose”.

“Did your dad call you today?” Izuku asks, as he nearly finishes taking notes on Iida’s notes.

“He—no?” Todoroki looks vaguely baffled. “I haven’t heard from him since the exams. Why?”

“You look upset. He’s usually the reason. Is it remedial training, then?”

The face Todoroki pulls tells him he’s a lot closer to the mark. “I’m here to study, not whine about my progress.”

“School’s school,” Izuku points out. “And you never complain when *I* whine about things.” Todoroki mutters something under his breath, sitting back to lean against the side of Izuku’s bed. “What was that?”

“You have enough on your plate, don’t you?”

When Todoroki says that, there’s a note of something in his voice that Izuku can’t place. “I’m not the only one who has an internship, you know.”

“I know,” Todoroki says. “No one else gets called away almost every day, though. And with your track record for getting into trouble, you can’t blame me for worrying.”

“You always say the sweetest things.” Izuku makes sure to say it in an exaggerated drawl. When Todoroki doesn’t answer immediately, he tries again. “But seriously, what’s up with your training? Is it that thing you said before, about how they don’t know what to do with you?” Hino’s not here at the moment, so he can’t just look to him for help. “That sounds like the opposite of a problem, you know? If they don’t know what to teach you, then maybe that means you’re good.”

Todoroki shakes his head. “They figured it out,” he says. “Well, Gang Orca figured it out.”

“What?”

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” Todoroki says it in a rush. “I don’t—it’s like I don’t know *why* anymore.”

Izuku frowns. “Why…?”

“Why I’m here. Why I’m doing any of this. I can think of some reasons, and they aren’t wrong, but they don’t feel *right*, either. They’re either too small, or too incomplete, or…”

“Is that important?” Izuku asks.

“Isn’t it?” Todoroki shoots him a pained look. “I want to be a hero. If possible, I want to be the best. Isn’t it important to have a reason?”

“I…” This is a lot heavier than he expected. “I’ve never really minded much. About people’s reasons for being a hero. I think it’s good to save lives for any reason.”

“But there should be one,” Todoroki insists. “And with me—it used to be so clear. It was so simple, back when all I wanted was to spite my father by climbing to the top without using fire. But it was stupid and selfish and you helped me see that, but now that’s gone and it’s not my reason anymore—and Endeavor’s number one already, so even if I

did want anything to do with his stupid plans, there's no point to them anyway. And at the exam, with Yoarashi and—and Toga Himiko…"

Izuku bridles. "There is *nothing* you can say to convince me that any of that was your fault."

"It doesn't matter if it was my fault," Todoroki snaps back. "All it did was prove that I still can't separate myself and my life from *him*. Every reason I've ever had to become a hero is either gone or changed or it doesn't fit anymore, and… I don't know what to put in its place." He hesitates. "I want to help my mother. I want to prove myself. There are certain people that—I want them to be *proud* of me. And those are all true, and they're all reasons, but they just… don't feel like enough."

"Well, what's enough?" Izuku asks. "Uraraka's trying to be a hero so she can support her parents. Just because it isn't big and poetic doesn't mean it's not a good reason."

"But at least she's sure of it. You're all sure of it—Uraraka, and Iida taking his brother's name, and—" Todoroki hesitates. "And then there's you, and that box."

Izuku shoots a glance at the space beneath his bed, where he last shoved the locked box after he showed its contents to his friends and All-Might. "What about the box?"

"It's just…" Todoroki's line of vision follows his, and then it changes as his eyes flicker around, as if he's wondering how many ghosts are in the room with them. "How do you *do* that?"

"Do what?"

"How do you just know the right way?"

"Wow. Um." Izuku wrings his hands in agitation. "I… kind of don't. I'll be perfectly honest, I've spent most of today and a lot of previous days feeling pretty helpless."

"I've just never seen you doubt yourself before," Todoroki tells him. "I mean—don't get me wrong, I've seen you scared, and you get flustered for the weirdest reasons, and you've pulled a lot of *incredibly* stupid moves—"

"Thanks," Izuku says.

“But you always know what you want,” Todoroki says. “Even if you don’t know how to get it, you know what you want and why you want it, and I… don’t. And that’s my problem, according to Gang Orca. I just… I’m not sure about *why* anymore.”

Izuku sits and thinks and lets Todoroki’s words sink in. “Can I ask one question? What’s wrong with the reasons you told me before? Like helping your mom, and proving yourself, and making people proud? Why aren’t they enough?”

“They just feel… shallow,” Todoroki says. “It’s all about me—my family, my problems, my feelings.”

“Once again: Exhibit Uraraka,” Izuku says. “Are you saying she doesn’t deserve to be a hero?”

“Of course not,” Todoroki retorts. “I just feel like I’ve been selfish for most of life, so if I really want to change things, shouldn’t I do the opposite?”

“That’s not selfish, though,” Izuku points out. “It’s just… personal. Being a hero is kind of personal for me, too.”

Todoroki frowns in confusion.

“Don’t look so surprised,” Izuku says. “I just want to save lives because I’ve spent my whole life talking to people who weren’t ready to die.”

“Hey, Sensei?”

Usually Shouta is the one to approach Midoriya on days he visits the hospital. But this time, his student hangs back in the classroom until the rest of the class has already filed out. “What is it, Midoriya.”

His student purses his lips before speaking. “You’ll probably tell me no,” he says. “I don’t know if it’s a good idea, or if it’s risky. But I wanted to ask you—I should probably talk to Nighteye about this too, but I thought I’d start with you since you’re probably involved in remedial training…”

Shouta’s eyes narrow. Midoriya’s talking like he’s trying to dance around several secrets at once, and that never bodes well—*especially not when Midoriya’s involved because with Midoriya it means… something. What, he’s not sure, but* something—“What’s this about?”

Midoriya tells him. Shouta, against all odds, doesn't tell him no.

Today is a good day, for Eri. It's good because she feels better than she did yesterday, and because the nurses are nice even though some of them are different, and because there are no shots today. (The band-aid from yesterday's is bright purple and she's decided that she likes purple.) It's good because she found a stuffed rabbit she likes in the bag of toys one of the new nurses brought. It's good because Deku is coming soon.

Nurse Mitsu says Deku's coming with someone else—and it's not Lemillion like it usually is. It's someone new, someone Eri doesn't know, and she's not sure what she thinks of that.

She hears him coming this time. Usually she doesn't. Deku is good at sneaking—of course he is, since he sneaked her away from Him. But this time she hears his voice, and someone else's voice, and then there they are.

"Hi, Eri!" Deku plops down to the floor beside her. The other one stays back, watching her, but not in a scary way. Mostly he just looks kind of confused. "I brought a friend today. Do you want to meet him? It's okay if you say no."

He always says that, whenever he asks her a yes-or-no question. Eri thinks he might actually mean it.

But still, she nods. If he's Deku's friend then he has to be nice.

Deku waves him over and pulls on him until he sits down. "This is Shouto. He's a hero too, like me."

A hero. Eri has met heroes. She's still not sure what they are, but Deku says they help people, so that's good. "Hi," she says. "It's nice to meet you."

"It's nice to meet you too." His voice is soft. Eri likes that he doesn't yell. "Um. Nice rabbit."

"Thank you." She's not sure what's going on. He doesn't look like he knows what's going on either. "Did you come to visit me?"

He nods, and Deku says, "Yes." Eri frowns, wondering why, and Deku smiles and taps her lightly on the nose. "Because he was being nosy and wanted to know where I go every day. I brought him along so he

knows I'm not getting in trouble."

"Oh." She looks at his friend—Shouto. His name's Shouto. "Does he get in trouble a lot?"

Shouto blinks, then leans closer like he's sharing a secret with her. "*All the time*."

"He doesn't get in trouble here," she says. "Deku's nice. He reads me books. And he tells me things when I don't understand. And sometimes, he goes with me when I need *shots*." She points to the purple band-aid on her arm. Shouto inspects it and nods.

From there, the visit goes like it always does, except Shouto is there too. They talk to her—Deku talks the most, like always, but he doesn't seem to mind. Nurse Mitsu comes in to listen to her chest—for her heartbeat, Deku says. They look through more books, and Deku shows her a funny video of his cat.

It's only when they're about to leave that Eri asks a question that she's had. Deku doesn't mind questions—he likes when she asks him questions—but she isn't sure if Shouto likes them.

"You have a mark on your face," she says. Shouto looks back, and he doesn't look angry, so she asks her question. "I have marks, too." She shows her arms again, with all the little lines and dots and patches that the nurses don't have. "So does Deku. Are they the same kind of marks?"

For some reason, Deku's smiling a little at that, but he's behind Shouto where Shouto can't see him.

"Yes," Shouto tells her.

"Okay." Shouto's nice. If he comes again, she'd be okay with that. "Thank you for visiting me."

He smiles at her. She doesn't smile back—she's not sure how. "It was good to meet you."

"Hey, Midoriya?" It's late, and their homework is finished, and the likelihood that Shouto will go back to his own room to sleep is getting smaller by the minute. "That girl at the hospital. I know you're probably not allowed to tell me details, but who was she? Why'd you take me to her?"

“She’s someone I met on a patrol,” Midoriya answers. “She spooks easily, especially around medical stuff, so they keep calling me back to help keep her calm.” He shrugs. “I just figured, if you’re starved for good personal reasons to be a hero, there’s one more.”

“Personal?” Shouto echoes, shifting over so Midoriya can sit on his bed next to him. “I just met her. Why would she be personal for me?”

“Because right now, walking around somewhere probably surrounded by civilized people, there’s a very bad man who wants to use her for her quirk,” Midoriya says.

Shouto goes still.

“I don’t know why and I don’t know how,” Midoriya goes on, shrugging. “But… that’s the situation. So, I don’t know, maybe if you need a reason that’s not just you or your mom or the people you want to be proud of you, there’s people like her that you haven’t met yet.” He grins at Shouto, but it’s bleak. “Lots of scared kids out there.”

And that… that’s something. It’s not as deep-rooted as the desire to free his mother. It’s not a persistent itch like the desire to catch up to his friends. But it’s something.

Maybe it’s something he can offer Gang Orca, the next time they talk.

“Do you have to go out again today?” Tamaki asks him at the end of the day, as they leave the locker room with their shoes on and their bookbags packed.

“Yep!” Mirio answers. “I’ll be back around five-thirty like usual, but for now I have to swing by Grounds Theta to meet up with Midoriya. You can come if you want—you can say hi to Kirishima!”

Tamaki makes a quiet strangled noise. “But if they’re in Grounds Theta then they probably just finished up with rescue drills, and that means he’ll have energy. *Energy*, Mirio. It’s bad enough going on patrol with him.”

“Aww, is your kouhai a handful?” Mirio asks.

“He’s not bad,” Tamaki admits. “He’s really good, actually. He’s just… a lot. A lot, all the time. I lose half my spoons just looking directly at him.”

“Wonder if there’s a way to switch kouhais for an afternoon,” Mirio muses. Kirishima sounds like a lot of fun (he sounds like a *riot*, boy is it a shame he’s not in Nighteye’s agency because Mirio would tell that one daily if he was) and Midoriya’s whole demeanor would probably mesh better with Tamaki’s comfort zone.

“It’s just hard to handle first years,” Tamaki says. “They’re the exact opposite of me. So bright and optimistic and not-burnt-out.”

“But *I’m* bright and optimistic and not-burnt-out, and you love me,” Mirio points out.

“And I’ve been ingesting your presence since the third grade,” Tamaki says gravely. “I’ve built up an immunity. Your brightness is benign.”

“Maybe it’s like a vaccine,” Mirio says. “My faux-first-year energy can inoculate you to real first-year energy!”

“I’ll let you know if it works.”

Grounds Theta is a perpetually bombed-out mini cityscape on the west side of campus, and rather infamous to hero students familiar with training there. Support students are authorized to use it for testing grounds, just to keep it freshly ravaged. It’s rare that students leave Ground Theta without getting dusty, so there are showers located just outside of it. As Mirio and Tamaki approach, Mirio spots Aizawa supervising Class 1-A as they file out in clumps and cliques, all of them damp and battered and wearing fresh clothes. Mirio spots Midoriya’s dark curls among them and waves to get his attention. It doesn’t work; Aizawa’s addressing the class, so all eyes are on him. Mirio stops a short distance away and lets Tamaki shuffle behind him to stay out of everyone’s direct line of sight.

“Keep your performance today fresh in your minds,” Aizawa tells them. “I’ll be addressing each of you individually on how you can improve from here, so don’t let me catch any of you writing this off as just another exercise.” His class responds with a ragged *Yes, Sensei*. “And one more thing—we enforce lights-out for a *reason*. Try to keep nightly wanderings to a minimum, even if you stay within the building. If you have trouble sleeping, I suggest you see Recovery Girl about it instead of waking up one of your classmates about it, understood?”

“Yes, Sensei!”

“Understood, Kaminari?”

The student in question offers halfhearted protests but eventually responds in the affirmative.

“Good. You’re all dismissed.”

Aizawa turns on his heel to head back to the main campus. At this point the third years fall into his line of vision, and he offers them both a nod. Behind him, Kaminari is still pouting at his classmate, the pink horned girl whose name escapes Mirio at the moment.

“I don’t see why I’m the one getting called out,” he says, in a tone that’s trying to be hushed and failing. “Midoriya spends what, four? Five nights a week in Todoroki’s room?”

Without missing a beat or changing his expression, Aizawa stops walking and turns around again.

A few of the others groan, and Mirio winces in sympathy when he sees the look on Midoriya and Todoroki’s faces. The pink girl swats Kaminari in the shoulder. “Way to *go*, Kaminari.”

Kirishima is looking at his classmate with pure dismay. “C’mon man, we said we wouldn’t snitch!”

Aizawa sighs loudly. “I stand corrected. Everyone but Midoriya and Todoroki, you’re dismissed.”

The class leaves the area, most of them still ragging mercilessly on Kaminari. Kirishima spots the third-years and calls out an enthusiastic greeting, which Tamaki answers with a high-pitched noise of his own. Aizawa and the remaining two students move further away to keep from being overheard. None of them look happy about it.

Mirio purses his lips, eyes wide. He really, really shouldn’t laugh, but he also really, really wants to. “It was kind of inevitable,” he says, his voice tight with held-back mirth. “I mean with the dorms and everything.”

Tamaki gives a world-weary sigh. “Teenagers,” he says.

“Tamaki, we’re literally both teenagers.”

“Mm.” Tamaki leans over to bump his shoulder lightly. “I’m gonna go. See you this evening?”

“Make sure Nejire doesn’t eat my yogurt again, okay?”

Luckily (for the two first-years especially) the conversation doesn't take long. Todoroki hurries after his classmates at a power-walk. Midoriya, by this point, has spotted Mirio and is approaching him with a disgruntled look on his face.

"That looked rough," Mirio remarks, waving one last time to Aizawa.

"Let's just go."

Of course, there's enough time between the school and the hospital for the conversation to start up again. They've barely left campus when Mirio says, "Hope you didn't get in too much trouble. I know Aizawa's pretty tough. And *technically* there's no rule against not sleeping in your own dorm, though different teachers have different standards, and there are, uh, extenuating—"

"We're not in trouble," Midoriya says with a shrug. "He basically just gave us the be-safe-and-smart-and-see-Recovery-Girl talk. There's nothing to punish anyway."

"Oh, that's good!" Mirio says brightly. "You, uh, don't look very happy, for someone who isn't being punished."

"I'm just not looking forward to this evening," Midoriya admits. "They won't mean about it, but they tease, and if we leave together to escape the teasing it'll only get worse, so…"

Mirio winces in sympathy again. "Oof, that's no fun. I kind of know how that feels… kind of. I mean, I'm not actually in that kind of relationship, but—"

"There is no relationship!" Midoriya snaps. "I don't get why anyone thinks there is, or has to be! There isn't!" He stops immediately, as if just remembering where he is and who he's talking to. "Sorry. That wasn't aimed at you. It's just…"

"Weird, confusing teenager stuff?"

"Maybe?" Midoriya pulls a face. "I don't even know sometimes."

Mirio squints at him for a moment. This is starting to feel a bit familiar. Maybe… it *could* be… but… hm, he can't be sure. It's a strong maybe. He needs more information. "I could try taking a shot at it, if you want," he offers. "I know there's only two years between us, but you never know. I know things. And I'm impartial!"

“You’re really not,” Midoriya says. “You care about everything.”

“Exactly! I care about everything equally, therefore I’m impartial.”

“I’m not sure that’s how it works.”

Mirio grins. “Try me.”

Midoriya hesitates, eyeing him cautiously for a moment. “Todoroki and I aren’t together, that way,” he says at length. “We’re not interested in it, either. We’ve talked about that, and we both agree.”

Things are starting to click. “You aren’t together that way,” Mirio echoes. “Implying you are together *some* way. Right?”

Midoriya nods. “It doesn’t feel like we’re just friends,” he continues. “I mean, we sleep together—*literally*. We just sleep. And I can’t imagine doing that with any of my other friends, or telling them some of the stuff I tell him. It’s just, we’re close, but we don’t want to date each other. I know that doesn’t make a lot of sense…”

It makes so much sense, Mirio thinks. It makes *all* the sense. “You care about him a lot, then?”

“I mean, obviously—”

“You love him,” Mirio goes on, and Midoriya draws his shoulders in like a turtle.

“W-well, I…”

“You love him,” Mirio repeats. “But you’re not in love with him. Does that sound about right?”

The shoulders go down. Midoriya blinks, and oh, does Mirio recognize that look in his eyes. He must have had one just like it, back when it all clicked for him.

“Y-yeah,” Midoriya says quietly. “That’s… yeah, that’s exactly right.” He turns to Mirio with a clear question in his eyes.

“I’ve known Tamaki since we were eight,” Mirio tells him, grinning fondly. “I trust him with my life, along with a lot of other things. But, you know… not *that* way.”

“Oh,” Midoriya says. He has the face and voice of someone whose world is rearranging itself a little. “I didn’t know that—I mean, I

thought it was weird, because…"

"There's a word for it," Mirio says. "Well, in English at least. It's a bit of a mouthful—*queerplatonic*. Personally, I find 'QP' easier to say."

"QP," Midoriya repeats in a hushed voice. "There's a *word* for it."

"Sure is! Basically it's like, having a significant other that's not romantic. It's all about the level of commitment, and intimacy, I guess. It varies based on the person, but it's not weird, and there's nothing wrong with it."

"Do you know anybody else like that?" Midoriya asks.

"I mean, there are online forums and stuff for it," Mirio replies. "But in person… well." He hesitates. He wants to be truthful, and it could very well mean the world to Midoriya. But it also might not be Mirio's business, and…

"Senpai?"

"It's possible," Mirio says. "I don't really, uh, know for sure. But there was someone who helped me figure this out, when I was sort of in the same spot you were. He didn't know any fancy words for it, but it helped to talk to him, because it really felt like he understood, on a personal level. He helped a lot just by sharing his own experiences, and it felt really familiar when he talked about it…" His voice trails off. Midoriya has this weirdly piercing way of looking at people, like he hears way more than what they choose to tell him. Mirio swipes his hand over his face. "*Please* don't tell him I told you this, I'd never hear the end of it."

"You're talking about Nighteye," Midoriya says softly. "Aren't you?"

Mirio knows he's a terrible liar, so he nods. "Like I said, I don't know for sure, and I didn't learn the language for it until later when I did my own research. But… I don't know, Midoriya. I just got that feeling, whenever Sir talked about All-Might."

Midoriya doesn't say anything to that—doesn't say anything at all until they get to the hospital. Mirio only hopes he hasn't overstepped. But he couldn't have helped himself, seeing Midoriya so frustrated and confused. He may be an enigma sometimes, but Mirio's known for a while that more than anything else, Midoriya wants to be understood.

So it's worth it, just to put that familiar look in his eyes, like disparate

pieces are falling into place and the world is finally making a little more sense.

Chapter End Notes

> Content warning: Implied/referenced child abuse and imprisonment, discussion of abuse and emotional manipulation, past medical abuse/trauma.

Chapter 54

Chapter Notes

ART

ash-underdash

frivolouspotato

landofdrawsandfrogs

ghostlyronin

wannabefamousonthissite

ilovenarutouzumaki123456789

beroniiika

am-i-the-last-dreamer

tamlins-stories-and-poems

21black30butterfly30

salmoncoloredsasquatch

a-cely

bokunoheromikuko

hylianhick

middlenameever

As always, this story has a TV Tropes page!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuku is in for several surprises, the next time Nighteye calls him and Togata in for an office meeting.

For one thing, it's not just a meeting for members of Nighteye's agency; Kirishima is there, along with Amajiki-senpai and their internship supervisor, the hero Fatgum. There are a few others that

Izuku somewhat recognizes, faces from other agencies. Even Aizawa-sensei is here.

For another, there's the topic of today's meeting.

"My colleague and I have suspected for a while that the separate cases we've been pursuing are linked," Nighteye says, with a respectful nod to Fatgum. "Today the test results came back on the quirk suppression bullets recovered from Fatgum's recent encounter with villains, and he was good enough to share them with me."

"Not just my encounter!" Fatgum breaks in. "My fine young interns did most of the encountering, in fact—and did quite well for themselves!"

Amajiki tries to sink lower in the seat, until Togata gives him an encouraging nudge. The meeting is somewhat informal, at least by Nighteye's standards, so there's not much of a seating arrangement. Fatgum actually encouraged the interns to sit together, which is fantastic because office meetings are so much easier for Izuku to sit through when Kirishima is next to him.

"I don't think I need to remind you all that the information I'm about to divulge must not leave this room except through the appropriate authorized channels." Nighteye's hawklike gaze settles briefly on Izuku and Kirishima. "And if talking about policy doesn't convince you, then keep in mind there's a little girl on the line."

Kirishima stiffens. Izuku sits up a little straighter in his seat. The look that his classmates shoots him promises questions in the foreseeable future.

"Thanks to my interns' efforts, we were able to retrieve broken and intact bullets from the scene," Fatgum continues, with a proud grin at Kirishima and Amajiki. "And therefore, we could send the quirk-suppressing serum to labs for analysis."

"Do we know the serum's chemical makeup, then?" one of the other heroes asks. "Or how the villains synthesized it in the first place?"

"They didn't," Nighteye says grimly. "At least not in the way you're thinking."

Izuku looks at him, shocked. This has to do with Overhaul, or Nighteye wouldn't be involved at all. Does this mean he isn't the one making quirk-suppressing drugs after all? He shoots a quick glance at

Togata, but his upperclassman seems just as startled as he is.

“Upon analysis, the contents of these bullets proved not to be synthesized chemicals,” Nighteye continues. “At least, not entirely. There is chemical modification, presumably to refine it, but the serum is largely biological, composed of blood and cells.”

A leaden pit lodges itself in Izuku’s belly, heavy dread pressing him down into his seat.

“As some of you may know, my own interns encountered a young girl fleeing capture from Overhaul,” Nighteye continues. “They were able to extract her, and she is currently recovering in a location that I will *not* disclose at this time. The cells in the bullets are a perfect match for her DNA.”

Izuku can feel his heartbeat in his ears. The sounds around him turn muffled, as if everyone is speaking underwater. His eyes are fixed on Nighteye’s grave face, and when he turns to Togata again, the latter is staring at him in horror.

“But… why?” one of the other heroes asks. “Of all the ways to create a drug like this… why make it out of some little girl’s blood?”

Izuku’s teeth grind.

“It’s likely that it’s something to do with her quirk, which we haven’t discerned yet,” Nighteye answers. He sounds tired. “She’s currently suppressing it, most likely due to the trauma.”

Fatgum gets to his feet. “If this is the case, then finding and detaining Overhaul is of the utmost importance!” he says. “She isn’t safe until he and his organization are off the streets!”

“We also have the rumors to think about,” Aizawa-sensei speaks up now. “Underground heroes and their informants have heard whispers of Overhaul meeting with the remaining major figures of the League of Villains. With All For One gone, they’ll be looking for new ways to remove heroes’ quirks from the equation.”

As Izuku puts his hands under the table to hide how his nails dig into his palms, Nighteye nods. “We are no longer accepting a rotation of nurses; her current caretakers remain on-site, and the building is under heavy surveillance to prevent Toga Himiko from infiltrating by replacing one of them. We’ll also be moving sites in the next few days, because one of the cameras outside caught a man whose physical

build is a bit too similar to Compress's. There are other measures…"

Izuku hears no more of the discussion, because as soon as Toga and Compress come up, his ears are already roaring. A gentle nudge from Kirishima makes him look over at him just in time to see his mouth form the words *you okay?*

Izuku nods, not trusting himself to smile. It seems like just yesterday that he reassured All-Might over this very thing, that for once he would face an enemy who wasn't the League of Villains.

As soon as the meeting is over, Izuku leaves his seat and heads for the nearest empty hallway. He just needs to get his head together; if he doesn't, then Nighteye might notice, and Izuku can't be sure he won't remove him from this assignment for getting emotionally compromised over it.

The pounding in his ears has barely gone down when he hears a warning hiss from Rei, followed by a voice he only barely recognizes.

"I remember. I remember now."

Izuku's heartbeat jackrabbits in his chest. The ghost is back—he's close, but Rei has him by the hand to keep him from getting *too* close. Quickly, Izuku takes in his surroundings and spots the nearest restroom—one of the single-stall types that can be locked directly at the entrance door. He leads the ghosts into the bathroom, then shuts and locks the door and turns to Eri's ghost.

"Tell me what you remember," he says.

"Blood." The ghost flickers. Rei lets go of him, but keeps a close eye on him in case he gets more agitated. "He took her blood. Other things, too. Bone marrow."

"You mean Overhaul, right?" Izuku says. "He took Eri's blood?" This is far from new information, but Izuku needs confirmation and a coherent ghost.

The ghost nods. "My daughter."

Izuku is glad to hear that she's not really Overhaul's daughter, but his heart still sinks. "Did he do this to you?"

"No." The dead man shakes his head, and keeps shaking it as if trying to clear it. "No, she—*god, what was she thinking?*"

“What did Overhaul do?” Izuku asks.

“He took her blood,” Eri’s father tells him. “He wants—he wants to use it, so he took her blood, he took pieces of her, again and again and again until she couldn’t give any more, and then…” He breaks off with a strangled sob, ducking and twisting his hands into his hair.

“He took her apart,” Izuku says softly. “And put her back together again, good as new. Right?”

“It hurts,” the ghost sobs again. “It hurts her so much she can’t even cry anymore.”

“Is that his quirk?”

Another nod. “It’s—it’s so *crowded*.” The ghost trembles. “Anyone he doesn’t like, anyone who disobeys—he takes them apart, and leaves them in pieces. Sometimes they’re just a smear on the wall. Some of them won’t stop *screaming*.”

“Why does he want her?” Izuku presses. “What’s in her blood?”

“No. No, you don’t understand.”

“You’re right,” he says. “I don’t understand. That’s why I need your help. I need to know what she has that he wants. If it’s her quirk—”

His back hits the locked door hard enough to drive the wind from him. “*It wasn’t her fault!*” the ghost screams at him until he’s afraid his ears will bleed. “It wasn’t her fault. She didn’t know. *I* didn’t know. None of us knew.”

“Knew *what*?”

A hoarse sob rips itself from the ghost’s chest, and he answers.

Nighteye is reorganizing case files in his office when Midoriya finds him.

“Sir, do you remember the ghost I told you about?” he asks, closing the door behind him. “The one following Eri?”

There’s a note of urgency in his tone, as well as a hint of breathlessness, as if he was in a rush to reach Nighteye’s office. There is not, however, any trace of sarcasm, which means Midoriya somehow expected him to forget that there is a ghost involved in all of

this. “Yes?”

“He’s lucid enough to remember things.” Midoriya crosses the room to his desk. “I was right, he’s her father.” Nighteye stops what he’s doing and looks up at this, silently urging Midoriya to continue. “At first I thought Overhaul killed him to take Eri, but I was wrong. He died when Eri’s quirk came in.” Midoriya meets his eyes. “She rewinds things. It manifested when he picked her up, and she rewound him so far back that there was nothing left of him.”

Nighteye already has his phone out, tapping out a quick message to Eri’s current caretakers. He’s lucky they won’t ask him how he came by this information.

(His heart sinks with pity. This is always a risk, in quirk society. Quirk manifestation can be a dangerous thing. No one can expect a four-year-old child to have control of a power they’ve only had for a few seconds.)

“Does he know how she ended up with Overhaul?” he asks, his voice tight.

Midoriya’s face darkens, and his mouth twists with contempt. “His wife—Eri’s mother—is the daughter of Overhaul’s yakuza boss. They’re estranged, but when her husband died, she left Eri with them and ran off. Once Overhaul found out what her quirk was, he started torturing her.” He lifts his chin. “That’s how the serum must work, right? He must’ve modified it so her quirk would just… *rewind* people’s quirk factors until they don’t exist anymore.”

“A logical guess,” Nighteye says grimly. He never thought he would find himself at this point—making judgments on the words of a dead man. But it’s a solid lead. “Could he tell you anything else?”

“I was lucky to get that much out of him,” Midoriya says. “He’s still not all there. Watching his daughter go through that for over a year must have messed him up.”

After his intern finishes delivering his information and leaves, Nighteye puts down the folder in his hand and closes his eyes to process everything. He still isn’t used to this. He’s been in this line of work for twenty years, and he shouldn’t be this squeamish, but something about having the dead answer back with words instead of tissue samples and DNA analyses unnerves him.

Like an autopsy, he reminds himself. Evidence is gathered from the

dead every day. That's all that Midoriya's quirk is, in the end. It shouldn't be any different from forensic science.

But it is. Cadavers don't have feelings, but if Midoriya is to be believed, the same can't be said of spirits.

Dark thoughts stick with him after that, even bleeding into his meeting with Eraserhead the following day. They're right at home there, because the underground hero's news is grim.

"They're on the move," Eraserhead says as they go over intelligence reports. "The city's crawling with Overhaul's people, looking for leads, keeping watch. Footsoldiers mostly, with a few bigger threats among them."

Nighteye passes his hand over his face. He's known this would be the case. It was obvious even before they knew the full extent of Eri's role in Overhaul's operation. But he's never been able to find hard evidence of it, at least through normal pro hero intelligence channels. But Eraserhead is no normal pro; underground heroes have their own methods, their own channels, their own tactics—the kind that heroes who work in the open would balk at. It means that Overhaul is making his moves on a massive scale, and covering his tracks so well that he's nearly undetectable to normal police work.

He says as much to Eraserhead, who grimaces. "That's the problem with obsolete criminal entitiess," he says dryly. "Yakuzas are small-time symbols of the past now. They're like—scenery. A backdrop to modern criminal activity. And that means the structures to keep track of their movements just aren't there anymore. Overhaul knows that, and he's taking full advantage of it." His lips turn up and he shows his teeth—it's a smile, technically, but there's no happiness or humor in it. "Another downside to our former Number One hero's run." His words stir up the settled ire within Nighteye. It must show on his face, because Eraserhead grimaces again and moves on. "Regardless, it's taking all I have just to stay on top and ahead of them—if you can call it that."

"Be cautious," Nighteye says, a bit snappishly. "If you get yourself caught, it won't help anyone in the long run." A thought occurs to him then. "You may very well be in danger yourself. If Overhaul's aim is to erase quirks, then yours would be of interest to him, as well."

"Believe you me, I know." Eraserhead doesn't appear affected by Nighteye's tone. "But caution is becoming less and less effective.

Overhaul's people are closing in. If they continue this way, then they'll find where we're keeping her eventually—either by process of elimination, or by catching you in the act of moving her. The only options are to take them down before they find her, or wait for her to be found and take them then."

"I won't use a little girl as bait for her abusers," Nighteye grits out. "Nor will I risk open war with criminals in the streets. The safety of the public is unstable enough as it is."

"Open war may happen whether we like it or not," Eraserhead said grimly. "They can afford to now, do you know why? Overhaul's alliance with the League of Villains may be considered hearsay officially, but in unofficial circles it's well past the point of being a rumor. In fact, it's the only reason why I've been able to track Overhaul's operation at all; the League may be quiet lately, but at least their movements are recognizable."

Nighteye clenches his teeth and says nothing.

After a moment, Eraserhead lets out a sharp sigh. "All I'm saying is this: you can't keep this quiet and subtle and safe. It's going to get ugly. However it ends, we may very well lose good people by the time it's over."

"I can't accept that," Nighteye says tightly. "I know our worlds are different, Eraserhead, but I won't accept that. Nobody has to die here." He waits, but Eraserhead doesn't answer, so he continues. "It would at least help to know who Overhaul's main contacts in the League are. Do you have any idea who that is?"

But Eraserhead doesn't answer. He's staring straight ahead, eyes misting over as if lost in thought.

"Eraserhead," Nighteye says.

The underground hero blinks slowly, as if coming out of a deep daydream. "Say that again," he says.

"What?"

"What did you just say?" Eraserhead is frowning, more present but still deep in thought.

"I wanted to know who Overhaul's main contacts are in the League of Villains—"

“No,” Eraserhead says. “Before that.”

Nighteye has to think for a moment. “I said that nobody has to die.”

“That’s…” For a moment Eraserhead just looks lost. His brow furrows, and when he speaks again, he seems to sound the words out carefully. “That’s not really up to you, is it?”

It’s not an odd thing to say so much as an odd way to say it. For the briefest of moments Nighteye is almost tempted to have a look at Eraserhead’s fate for a clue, but it’s an easy idea to squash. “Are you feeling quite all right?”

Eraserhead shakes his head, not to say no but to clear it. “Yes. You just reminded me of something one of my students said to me once—at the USJ, no less, when the League first showed up. Things must be pretty desperate, if you’re starting to quote my students by accident—especially if it’s *that* student.” The shadows under his eyes deepen.

“Have you slept recently?” Nighteye asks, though he suspects that he already knows the answer.

“By my standards,” Eraserhead answers unhelpfully.

The discussion resumes and doesn’t touch that topic again, but Eraserhead remains quiet and thoughtful throughout it.

This time, when Izuku leaves campus right after school, Kirishima is the one to watch him leave.

Now that Todoroki knows firsthand where he keeps disappearing, he barely gives Izuku’s departures a second glance. This has the unexpected bonus of getting Uraraka and Iida to stop giving him weird looks, too. They must assume that Todoroki worries about him enough to be a trustworthy gauge of whether or not Izuku is doing something stupid, which he’s glad of, because it’s hard to reassure them when security issues prevent him from telling everyone about what he’s doing for his internship and why.

All this just means that Kirishima’s attention is that much more noticeable. Izuku returns the look with an apologetic shrug. He’ll ask Nighteye later about how much he can tell Kirishima, especially since the two agencies seem to be working together on this.

For now, he has a visit to make. He’s a little excited today; he called

his mother recently to ask about some of the children's storybooks she stored away after he outgrew them, and now five of them are crammed into his backpack.

One of the higher-level office workers from Nighteye's agency comes to pick him up. Togata can't make the trip with him today; Nighteye has him on patrol, so he'll probably show up later if he decides to come in at all.

(He will. They haven't gotten Eri to smile yet.)

Izuku gets a text from Nighteye alerting him to a change in the watch schedule; Centipeder is supposed to be the one screening people who go in and out of the building where they're hiding Eri, but he called in for a replacement after taking sick during his watch shift. Izuku's heart goes out to him; it's well into autumn, and that means flu season is upon them.

Bubble Girl is nice, though. She greets him with a smile and a lightbulb joke when he's dropped off (*How many ranked heroes does it take to change a lightbulb? Just one, they don't like to share the spotlight.*) and they trade code words before she lets him through.

"Anybody else come through?" he asks hopefully. There's a small chance Mirio has already finished up.

"Nope! And Centipeder said the same thing when I asked him." She passes him the com device. "Here's your panic button, you know the drill."

"Yeah, thanks."

Izuku picks up his pace to jog through the lobby, adjusting the straps on his backpack. This area is usually empty; everyone who enters knows exactly what they're there for, and the heroes at the door are the ones controlling access, so there's no need for a receptionist desk. There's definitely something to be said about secret operations: they're very efficient.

Rei darts ahead of him through the first door, and he can't help smiling at her excitement. She likes being around Eri, even if Izuku is the only one who knows she's there. Sometimes he thinks she misses the days when he was smaller than her, and being around Eri reminds her of them.

One of the medical technicians steps out into the hallway and spots

him. “Oh, hello, Midoriya-kun,” she greets him. “Did you need something?”

By itself, it’s an innocuous question. There’s no real reason for Izuku to do anything but offer a polite no and keep walking.

And yet…

Izuku pauses, because it’s odd. It’s an odd thing to say to someone who’s just arrived, who’s scheduled to be here, who’s walking in a straight line because he knows exactly where he’s going.

“No?” he says, almost asks. “I just got here. Eri’s not in a different room, is she?”

The technician blinks at him, confusion clouding her face. “She shouldn’t be,” she says. “Is that why you’re back down here? Did you have trouble finding her?”

And Izuku’s heart sinks low, low in his chest, so low it has to be reaching his stomach.

“What do you mean, ‘back’?”

“I mean I just spoke to you a minute ago,” the technician says. “If you’re back down already, then—”

Izuku is already running, tearing off his backpack to rid himself of excess weight. He barely remembers comming Bubble Girl before he has his phone to his ear, dialing as he runs down the hallway and makes for the nearest stairs.

Nighteye, to his credit, picks up on the first ring.

“I’m at the facility,” he says, as soon as he hears Nighteye breathe over the line. Rei is long gone by the time he yanks the door open and launches himself up the steps with One For All. “I just got here and one of the technicians told me she already saw me pass through.”

Nighteye’s breath hisses as if through clenched teeth. “I’m sending—”

Izuku doesn’t hear the end of that sentence, because someone knocks his feet out from under him on his way up the stairs. His phone flies from his hand and out of reach. His chin hits the corner of a step, and he narrowly avoids biting his tongue.

With a yell, he flips over to face his attacker and struggles to his feet,

still dazed as blood trickles down his throat. The stairwell is dim, but not dim enough for his eyes. He knows the villain standing over him; he hasn't seen her since Kamino, but she's unmistakable.

"*You*," he spits at Magne. "Seriously? Don't tell me you people are working with yakuzas now. Is this how desperate the League is?"

The villain doesn't rise to his taunt. He struggles to his feet, or tries, but Magne's foot comes down hard on his chest, pinning him to the stairs. With her shoe crushing him like that, he can feel her shaking.

"Holy shit," she grits out. "It's true. It's *true*."

"What are you talking about—"

"It's nothing personal," she says. "Well—that's a lie. It's very personal. But not against you." Her lips stretch wide in a smile, showing the blood in her teeth. "Are you worried about Overhaul? Don't be. Soon as they get him the girl, he'll hand over the formula, and then—and *then*—he'll be all yours. Shigaraki'll wrap him up in a nice little bow for you. Maybe he'll send him in pieces." She laughs, and it's high and clear and cold.

His eyes adjust further, and Magne meets his gaze.

"Do you understand?" she asks, fixing him with her blank, dead-white eyes. "He has to pay first. He hurt Compress. He *killed* me. And we're not like him. No one's a tool, no one's a pawn. Every one of us is in it together, and that's why he'll get what's coming to him. You heroes —" Her shoe digs further into his chest. Her voice rises. "You *two-faced hypocrites* can have what's left on a silver platter. All yours. You won't even have to lift a finger. All it'll cost you is one little girl—"

Rei appears without a sound, but by the time she hits Magne the stairwell is echoing with her howling. Magne falls back, flickering as she screams, and Izuku scrambles up and keeps running. He makes the mistake of looking back, just in time to see Magne revert back to what Overhaul left of her. It isn't much.

The next floor is Eri's. Izuku hears Magne's screams and Rei's snarling, forces down the sickening horror, and prays he won't be too late.

Eri has been quiet since Deku got here.

She's almost never quiet when he's here. If anything it's the only time

she *isn't* quiet, because when Deku comes, he brings so many things to talk about. Books. Pictures. Funny little movies. Sometimes he just sits and tells her stories, tells her about things and places she's never heard of before. He talks, she listens, and—best of all—he lets her ask *questions*.

She loves it. He's scary sometimes but she isn't afraid of him, and she knows he isn't afraid of anything *because* he's scary. No one who's that scary can be afraid of anything, and if she stays with someone who's scarier, then… then people who hurt her… well, then no one's going to hurt her, right? She feels safe. She's never felt safe before.

And she doesn't feel safe now.

"What's the matter, Eri-chan?" He smiles at her, again, but it's all wrong. When he smiles at her like that, it feels like his eyes are raking over her, digging under her skin and catching.

Eri knows what to do around people who look at her that way. She presses her lips closed, looks at the floor, and doesn't move.

"Aww, don't be like that." He touches her face, and when she pulls away without thinking, he touches her again anyway, squeezing until his fingers dig into her cheeks. "You're so cute and *soft*, Eri-chan, and you have the sweetest little voice."

Eri's heart sinks low, low, low in her chest, and it doesn't come back up. Deku doesn't touch her unless it's okay with her first, but now he is, and that means it's finally over. It's always like this, with her babysitters. They're nice to her, they speak softly and give her things, but eventually they get tired of it. They stop asking and start making her do things, and Deku—

Deku was better at it, it lasted longer and it felt different but now it's back to the same, all over again, and it feels so much worse because Eri forgot to be ready for it.

"That's such a sad face, Eri-chan!" Deku frowns at her, squeezing her cheeks again. "Tell you what—I brought you something that might make you feel better. Do you want to see what it is?"

Eri doesn't answer. People who talk to her like this never actually want her to, even when they ask her questions.

"Come on! I'll show you." Deku gets up and pulls at her, forcing her to her feet while Eri's stomach ties itself in knots. She raises her eyes

again, and there's nothing right about the smile on Deku's face. His voice is quiet but eager, like he's sharing a secret with her. "Hurry up, Eri-chan, let's go! You'll love it, I know you wi—"

He's tumbling across the floor in the next moment, over and over until he stops, and then Eri's view of him is blocked.

"Sorry, Eri." It's Deku's voice, but Deku isn't talking—he's still on the floor. His voice is coming from the person in front of her. Eri looks up, and sees another Deku standing there.

This Deku isn't like the first. This one looks angry.

"I'm sorry I didn't get here faster. You must be really confused, huh?"

Eri stares.

"Do you remember what book we read together, yesterday?" Deku—the one standing in front of her—asks. She nods. She had asked him about birds once, and he brought her a book full of pictures. Deku turns to her, and she sees his face fully. "Would you like to try asking *that* one what book it was?"

For a moment Eri forgets where she is, and when she is. She's not sitting in the playroom with the nurses' station right outside, wearing a soft clean robe just her size. She's out in the street, the rough ground scraping her sore feet, in a dirty, itchy smock that slips off one shoulder because of a tear in the neck. Deku's face looks the same now as it did then, teeth bared and eyes bright, angry but not at her, scary but not to her.

She doesn't need to ask, Eri realizes as she curls her fingers into his pant leg. She knows which one is *her* Deku.

The other Deku—the fake one—is standing again, smiling that wrong smile again. His teeth look sharp. "Did you know I was here?" he asks the real Deku. "You did, didn't you? You totally knew I was here. Were you excited to see me again, Izu-chan? I've missed you sooo much!"

Deku is glowing. He's sparking green all over, but the sparks don't hurt even then they touch her. It feels *warm*. Warm and strong and safe and just a little bit frightening, but for someone else. Someone who isn't her.

He doesn't say anything. He just stands in front of Eri and waits. The

Wrong Deku's smile fades a little.

"You were so much fun, before," he says—almost *whines*. "But now you won't even talk to me. It's been so long, Izu-chan. I missed you. Didn't you miss me, too? Even just a little?" When Deku doesn't answer, his face changes. It's stretched and ugly, and not-Deku's face was already wrong before, but seeing this makes Eri want to curl up small and hide. "I know you did. Don't try to lie. You're *special*, Izu-chan! You're special to me, and I'm special to you! I know it! I can prove—!"

Eri hears nothing more.

The room vanishes—the floor, the walls, the toys and books and Deku and not-Deku, all vanish. Eri is somewhere small, curled up and cramped with no idea which way is up or down. She can't hear or see, everything is dark and silent, closing around her, crushing her into nothing. She tries to cry for help, but she can't even hear herself scream.

And then, as suddenly as it started, it's over. She's back in the world again, but the playroom is gone, and there are arms around her, pulling her close.

Deku's arms. She's so close she can hear him breathing, fast and short and noisy.

She hasn't seen this hallway before. It looks like the rest of this place, but she doesn't know where it is. She's too scared to leave the places she has already been, too scared of straying far enough for *him* to find her. She doesn't know where she is, only that Deku is here, holding her. He got her out, he got her away from *him*, and when she asked him not to let go, he didn't.

There's a man in the hallway before them. She can't see his face behind the mask, but she can hear his voice. The Wrong Deku is gone, and the real one is beside her, breathing funny and shaking against her.

He's *shaking*.

Eri twists around to look at him. He doesn't look back, because his eyes are on the man in the mask, and he won't move, won't talk, won't look at anyone or anything else.

She's never seen him scared before.

“Ah,” the man is saying. “I was wondering if you remembered me. But you do, don’t you?”

“Stay away.” Deku’s voice shakes.

“You know I can’t do that, Midoriya,” the man tells him, and steps toward them. Deku pulls back, but there’s a wall in the way. “But you don’t have to worry, because I’m not here to take you back. I’m here for the girl only.”

“I’m *warning you*.” It doesn’t just shake; it cracks, like Deku’s voice is breaking apart and the rest of him is going to do the same.

There’s someone Deku is scared of, Eri thinks. There’s someone who’s so strong, so terrible, that Deku can’t do anything but shake and cry in front of them. She knows what that’s like.

“I can take you back all the same, if you make this difficult,” the man says. “Is that what you want? I’m afraid it would be a much longer journey, with Kurogiri out of reach for now.” He lifts his hand, and Deku *flinches*.

The man is fast, and there’s nowhere to run, but Deku throws her out of the way. She hits the floor and rolls, and when she looks back, Deku is gone and the man is holding a shiny marble. He sighs, annoyed, and flicks it away. It breaks, and Deku hits the wall and slides down. He doesn’t make any sound except his sharp, quick breathing, but there are tears on his face as he presses himself back.

“You are trying my patience,” the man says. “You try all our patience, and I’ve half a mind to take you along anyway, but you’ve always been more trouble than you’re worth. I could always use my quirk on you and leave you here. How long do you think it would take them to find you?” He steps forward and raises his hand again, and Deku shrinks back just like her old babysitters before they died, just like *his* people when he’s angry, just like—

just like *her*

“Wait.” She stands, and her heartbeat rattles in her chest, and her throat tastes the way it always does when she’s about to be sick. But that’s okay.

That’s okay, she tells herself, and wishes she could believe it.

The man is looking at her now, she thinks. His hand hovers over

Deku, and she makes her feet carry her forward until it lowers.

“Wait,” she says again. “Don’t. I’ll go—I’ll go with you.”

“*Eri*.” Deku’s voice hisses and rattles out of him, but the masked man’s hand comes up again, and he chokes on her name.

“I’ll *go*,” she says, and she’s already crying but she says it anyway, because Deku is *nice* and *good* and he doesn’t deserve to be scared, not for someone who’s cursed and broken already. Not for her. “I’ll go, if you don’t hurt him. You can do it to me, not him. Please.”

“Interesting,” the masked man says. “You say that when you don’t even know what I’ll do. What I’ve been told to do.”

“Eri, just *run,*” Deku sobs, but she steps closer again.

“You’re here to take me back.” She knows that’s what it is. It can’t be anything else. It was never going to be anything else. “Right? You’ll take me back to him.”

“To Overhaul, yes,” the man says. “It’s part of our agreement, you understand.” She doesn’t, but that doesn’t matter. That’s not important right now.

“Then it doesn’t matter,” she says. “What you do. Because no matter what, he’ll put me back together. So it doesn’t matter. Please don’t hurt him.” She blinks, and she can’t see them through the tears. That’s probably better. Maybe it will be like shots. Maybe it will hurt less if she doesn’t look.

“You had such bold words before,” she hears the masked man say. “But look—here’s a child with ten times the backbone you have. Pay close attention, little hero. You might learn something.”

She blinks again, and he stands over her. His hand comes down, and she shuts her eyes.

It’s just like before, when the fake Deku tried to take her. It’s like a breath of wind against her face, a cry of pain, and the sound of a struggle. She opens her teary eyes right as she’s swept up off the ground, the masked man is no longer there and instead—

She’s seen him almost as much as she’s seen Deku, but not like this, in bright colors and a pretty red cape—not since that first day, when she ran barefoot through the streets into Deku’s arms. Into safety.

He grins at her as he holds her out of the masked man's reach, strong and bright with no trace of fear. "Don't worry, Eri!" Lemillion tells her. "I've got this. You go with Deku, alright?"

She passes from his arms into Deku's and clings once she's there. Deku isn't on the floor anymore, but he's on his knees and still shaking while she presses close and watches Lemillion with wide eyes, listens to him tell Deku *take her, get downstairs, there's backup, I'll handle this.*

The masked man staggers up, and when he talks again he sounds breathless. "Well, this has been interesting. But I think it's time I took my leave."

And Lemillion grins, all white teeth and shining eyes. "Oh!" he says cheerfully. "Is *that* what you think is going to happen?"

That's all she sees before Deku carries her away and out of sight. Then Lemillion is gone, the masked man is gone, the fake Deku is gone, they're running away and there's safety up ahead. It's okay now. They're going to be okay.

So why won't Deku look at her? Why is he still crying?

It's only with the help of several ghosts that Izuku makes it to the safety of Togata's promised backup with Eri. There's no room in his mind for thoughts and directions, and hardly any room in his eyes for seeing the path ahead. When the tears finally blind him, he lets Rei hold on and tow him along, follows her static and the tug of her cold hands.

Magne is gone, Arai and the rest of Toga's victims are gone, and there's no sign of any more villains or their ghosts, just Nighteye's people. That is one of two reasons that Izuku doesn't fight and scream when someone tries to pull Eri from out of his arms.

The other reason is that he can feel himself rapidly unraveling.

The marble prison still surrounds him, suffocating and small as it closes around him and shuts him in a tiny void. The past few months may as well have been rewound, and he's back in Kamino, back in the warehouse, back in the woods, screaming as Compress traps him again. He can't fall apart yet, not with Eri there to see—

And what does that matter? some small part of him thinks viciously. *She already saw you fold and cry. She already saw you almost give her up to*

the enemy without a fight.

The back of his throat tastes like bile and rot. His bones feel brittle, and his blood is ice water. He doesn't have long.

Someone—one of the medical staff (not Toga, Izuku checks and double checks the ghosts nearby, watches Eri's father for any sign of distress) finally takes her from him. She clings as she's taken, holding on to his sleeves until there's too much space between them for her arms to reach, and then she's gone and Izuku is alone, shuffled into another vehicle.

Bubble Girl is the one who slides in next to him, talks to him as he stares blankly straight ahead. As Nighteye's sidekicks go, Awata Kaoruko isn't bad; she's nice and she likes him, and he kind of likes her too. Her quirk is interesting and she's a good hero in every way. She's kind and sweet and her jokes are terrible. There are worse people to fall apart in front of.

It's too hard to hear what she's saying through the cotton-wool feeling in his ears, so he doesn't try. But he does look at her, and he does ask, "Is Eri gone? She can't see me?"

Awata frowns, looks out the car window, and shakes her head. She asks him something else—maybe she asks him if he wants to go see her when things settle, maybe she asks if he wants to ride in the same car with her.

"No, that's okay," Izuku tries to tells her, but his tongue locks in his mouth and won't let the words through. *I just wanted to make sure she couldn't see.*

The marble prison closes in, and Izuku lets himself crumble.

Chapter End Notes

> Content warning: Discussions of medical abuse and trauma, accidental death, child abandonment, implied memory loss, canonical character death (Magne), imposters, nonconsensual touching, claustrophobia, panic attack.
>
> (If you're confused about the part with Aizawa, try reading Chapter 9 again.)

Chapter 55

Chapter Summary

Happy New Year, guys!

Chapter Notes

Art time!

a-side-of-fries

alex-hafthora

hogwarts-missed-their-chance (2)

pboperation

nye-eclipsion

arrowacestudios

pamelloe

xx-kirasmile-xx

As always, this story has a TV Tropes page!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everyone and everything converges back on Nighteye's office, and it is only then that he allows himself a heartfelt sigh of relief. The girl is safe, his people are safe, and they have one villain in custody: Mirio took on Mr. Compress of the League of Villains, who is already being transported to a secure holding facility. Even Centipeder is all right; he had been under the influence of some quirk or other when he took ill, and the villains must have used the guard switch as an opportunity to slip in.

But it was all for nothing, in the end, because the heroes still hold the most important cards. Nighteye learned years ago to cherish the good days when they come. Sometimes they are rare

for the past six years they've been rare

and even today is not a total victory. Toga Himiko has slipped through

their fingers, and they have rock-solid confirmation that Overhaul is in bed with the League. The battle is won, and rest of the war looms over them.

Upon finding Bubble Girl he asks after his interns, and she directs him to the smaller second-floor meeting room. It's an odd place to have put them, he notes vaguely. His sidekick stops him before he goes.

"Handle it… gently, Sir," she advises him meekly. "They fought hard."

He knows that, obviously. Midoriya, for all that he's too clever by half, is stubborn to the point of belligerence, and Mirio is… well, *Mirio*.

The fact that Bubble Girl feels the need to tell him this means that something went wrong.

He finds them where she said they would be, and takes note of their appearances. Mirio is still in his hero costume; he hasn't changed yet, even though there's been plenty of time since the invasion was thwarted. He's talking quietly to Midoriya, but isn't getting much in response, and when Nighteye looks to his younger intern…

The room is empty and well out of the way of most foot traffic in the office. Bubble Girl took them somewhere they'd be alone. The look on Midoriya Izuku's face gives him a clue as to why.

He sighs lightly. "What happened?"

Mirio confirms his misgivings when he doesn't stand to give his report. He's as respectful and professional as ever, but he stays seated with one hand resting on his junior's shoulders.

It's straightforward. Mirio received the alert when he'd just gotten back from his patrol, and went straight to help. He found Midoriya and Eri cornered by Compress, and engaged the villain while Midoriya took the girl and fled to safety. It's the second time they've used that strategy, and Nighteye wonders if he ought to be concerned, but as they say in America—if it ain't broke, don't fix it.

"Thank you, Mirio," he says. "Well done with that villain. Midoriya?" He tries for a gentler tone than usual, because he hasn't seen Midoriya look like this before, and it's a stark reminder of his recent imprisonment by villains.

Midoriya takes a deep breath, but only manages a strangled noise.

Frustration flashes across his face, and Mirio gives his shoulder a light squeeze.

“It’s okay if you’re not up for that,” he says. “I can translate, remember?”

Nighteye’s eyes narrow in confusion. Translate?

“It’s something he told me earlier, Sir,” Mirio says. “If he’s under a lot of stress, he’ll go temporarily mute. It’s okay, though, we both know sign.” He lets go of Midoriya’s shoulder and gives him an encouraging smile. “Go ahead, I’m ready when you are.”

Midoriya looks away. Instead of speaking, he signs.

Again, it’s straightforward, in spite of the delivery. Midoriya arrived at the building for his usual visit with Eri after receiving word of the guard switch, and one of the nurses told him that he had already arrived earlier. Realizing that something was wrong, he had hurried to Eri and reached her just in time to find Toga Himiko wearing his face and attempting to lure her away. He retrieved the girl and came very close to subduing the villain before…

“Before?” Nighteye prompts when his interns pause.

Midoriya looks at him briefly, then averts his eyes again.

“Compress showed up,” he says, through Mirio. “I didn’t know he’d be there.”

Which means his ‘informants’ didn’t have time to warn him, Nighteye thinks. “Is there something unusual about Compress?” he asks.

Midoriya doesn’t answer right away. He hands rise and fall, wringing in his lap, but there’s nothing for Mirio to translate, until finally—

“I can’t fight Compress. I can fight anyone else, just not him.”

Nighteye frowns again. Like the temporary muteness, this feels like something he ought to have been told earlier. “Why not?”

Another period of hesitation passes, Midoriya’s hands shake and curl and uncurl. Nighteye looks to Mirio for an explanation, since it’s obvious that he knows what’s going on, but his protege’s attention is focused on Midoriya.

“Claustrophobic,” Midoriya says finally. He stops signing for a

moment to dig his nails into the knuckles of his other hand. “They figured it out in Kamino. Compress used his quirk on me when I didn’t behave.”

Mirio’s voice shakes as he translates, and Nighteye shuts his eyes for a moment to wrest down his own anger. There’s nowhere for it to go, with All For One medically brain-dead and Compress now safely in custody. It’s a cold reminder that Midoriya is not always so unflappable. He may be unsettlingly calm in the face of death, but everyone has fears and vulnerabilities. And Midoriya…

Well. He knew it was a risk, even before he knew about Midoriya’s original quirk. Not even the most seasoned heroes can come out of a four-day imprisonment physically and mentally unscathed, and Midoriya’s scars are finally showing through. He just wishes he could have been better prepared to deal with them.

“I wish you had told me this earlier,” he says at length. “There are steps that could have been taken to lessen the possibility of something like this happening. You know that, don’t you?”

Midoriya winces. “I—” he says out loud, with his own voice. “I didn’t. Think it’d come up. League wasn’t your case. Didn’t think I’d run into him.” His voice sounds rough, the tone jagged and catching.

“I believe we went over the possibility of the League and the Precepts joining forces many times, Midoriya.” Nighteye sighs again, faintly exasperated. “Let this be a lesson, then. You know your own weaknesses. When you deal with villains, you keep them covered or have someone else cover them for you, understand? Now, are there any others I should know about?”

“That’s the big one,” Midoriya mutters.

“Hm.” Nighteye purses his lips. “I’m taking you off active duty until further notice. I’ll be having a word with your homeroom teacher about this.”

To ask Eraserhead why he hasn’t assigned his student some goddamned therapy *for heaven’s sake*, he thinks. There’s not much that can be done about the dead floating around him, but at the very least the boy should talk to someone about his imprisonment.

But those are ideas best saved for his future discussion with Eraserhead. “For now,” he says, “you’re both dismissed.”

“What about Eri?” Mirio asks.

“She’s being tended to,” Nighteye says. “We’ll most likely move her to a more secure location, and modify our strategy to account for the League as well as the yakuzas.” He stops there, because continuing runs the risk of turning it into a discussion, and their day has been long enough. “But for now, both of you go home—back to campus, rather. I suggest you take this time to rest and reflect.”

“Thanks, Sir.” Mirio stands up at last, tugging Midoriya along with him.

Nighteye waits for them to leave the room before sinking into a chair to ride out his oncoming headache.

Izuku slips past his classmates, goes up to his room, and shuts the door behind him. His hands wring at his sides, curling and uncurling as soon as he lets go of the doorknob. He paces restlessly on a steady circuit along the whole length of his room, back and forth on a looping path, driven by restless energy. Rei darts alongside him, following him at first, then moving back to wait for him to finish burning nervous energy. Mika watches him from her spot on his pillow, blinking at him slowly.

His phone chimes with a message, interrupting his tangled thoughts and fretful pacing. It’s Todoroki, asking if he wants to join the others for a group study session. Izuku’s hand wavers over the screen—because he should. He really should. Visiting Eri and going on the odd patrol with Mirio have taken up so much of his time, and he really should take every opportunity he can to catch up, but…

But some things are more important than homework.

He *is* wasting time, though. Digging furrows in his carpet won’t fix anything, won’t help Eri, won’t stop the villains, won’t make up for his failures today—*for freezing up, for almost letting Compress and Toga walk away with Eri.*

Here he is wallowing in his own anxieties when he could be doing any one of those things instead. And he *can* do them. He can even do all of them if he puts his mind to it, even with Nighteye’s orders to stay off duty (*and doesn’t that sting*). He just can’t do them alone.

“Rei?” he stops pacing, and she perks up. “Could you get everyone together? Tensei, Ms. Nana, Narita and Mrs. Kitayama. Hino, if he’ll

come. I need to talk to them."

Rei nods vigorously and vanishes.

Once she's gone, Izuku remembers the text and declines as politely and apologetically as he can. It's probably not enough to keep Todoroki from worrying, but… oh well. This is important. There's a little girl on the line, and Izuku almost let her go once already.

Tensei is the first to come, then Hino and Ms. Nana. Narita shows up later, but Rei can't find Mrs. Kitayama at all.

But that's okay. Izuku just needs to start with a few.

"Is everything all right?" Tensei asks. "We heard about what happened earlier. Your friends have been worried about you."

"Yeah, kid, that was a clutch save, but…" Ms. Nana's voice trails off. "I mean… *Compress*."

Izuku winces. "Togata was the one that made the save," he says. "If he hadn't gotten there, Eri would be with the League right now. She'd be back with Overhaul." He swallows against a wave of nausea, and his treacherous mind wonders if Overhaul has a medical file on her, recording all the tests and experiments he's done on her to perfect whatever process he's come up wit—

He shakes himself. He can't afford to think about that. She's still safe, and she'll stay that way if he has anything to say about it.

"I messed up," he says, and realizes he's cutting off Hino mid-sentence without realizing it. "Sorry, what?"

"I *said*, it's funny that you're saying that when this one says you were the one who called for backup in the first place," Hino says, jerking his thumb at Rei. "So what's got your panties in a twist today?"

"I *messed up*," Izuku repeats. "When Compress showed up I was basically useless, and they almost—" His voice catches.

"They didn't," Ms. Nana reminds him. "Remember that. They didn't. You did everything right."

"I know," Izuku says. "But it almost wasn't enough, and they'll try again. You all know they will. They'll try and try until they get her back or until they're stopped. I want them stopped."

“Yeah, that tracks.” Hino eyes him warily. “So what’d you call us here for?”

“I’ve been stupid,” Izuku says. “The solution's been so obvious this whole time, and I’ve been sitting around playing by the rules instead of acting on it. Overhaul’s a murderer, just like All For One. And maybe he hasn’t lived as long, but he’s still killed a lot of people.” Izuku balls his hands into fists to keep them from shaking. “And that means he’s surrounded himself with his own enemies and he doesn’t even know it.”

He hears Nana’s breath hiss through her teeth as she realizes what he’s going to say.

“I know it’s a lot to ask,” he goes on, before any of them can interrupt. “I know you’re not alive anymore, and this isn’t really your fight, but there are dead people who *do* consider it their fight, and I can’t get to them. But maybe you can.”

“*Oh*,” Narita’s form shimmers slightly, and Izuku chances a look at his face. The ghost looks eager, and that’s a good sign.

“Ms. Nana, Tensei, you were heroes. And all of you are ghosts. All of you can go anywhere, see and hear anything. You could *find* them. You could find Overhaul. You could find out where he is, what he’s planning, what kind of manpower and resources he has. After today, Nighteye’s not letting me back out into the field, and I hate it but I guess I can’t blame him.” He takes a deep breath. “But I can still help. If you’re willing help me pull it off. I know it’s a lot to ask, but—”

“Hey,” Hino cuts him off, and Izuku can’t help but wince. “Eyes up here.” Izuku raises his chin and braces himself, only for Hino to smirk at him. “You’re spinning all this into a big speech but you said it yourself, we’re *dead*. Do you really think we have anything better to do?”

Ms. Nana pushes herself ahead of him, looking exasperated. “What he’s trying to say is, of *course* we’ll help you, sprout. Honestly, I’m just glad you’ve found a way to keep out of harm’s way *and* nose into someone else’s business.”

“So, you’ll do it?” Izuku asks hopefully.

“It feels like forever since I got to do any real legwork.” Tensei grins broadly. “I think Tenya will be fine by himself for a little while.”

“Finally, I can do something that matters,” Narita says. “You’ve got yourself a deal, Midoriya. We’ll find the bastard and bring you all the dirt on him we can.”

“If you go to where they’re keeping Eri, you’ll find her dad with her,” Izuku tells him. For the first time since this afternoon, excitement thrums back to life in his veins. “I think he’s lucid enough to tell you where to start looking.”

“If not, the dead are everywhere,” Ms. Nana reminds him. “We’ll spread the word, ask around. We’ll find him.”

“Thank you,” Izuku says. One by one the ghosts vanish from his bedroom. Rei hesitates for a moment until Izuku motions her to go on, and eventually she disappears as well. Izuku is left standing in an empty room, alone but for Mika napping on his bedspread.

He goes to his desk and rifles through one of his drawers until he has a fresh, empty notebook in hand.

Ever since Midoriya took him on one of his daily outings, Shouto finds himself worrying less. It’s not gone by any means, but it’s less. Given how often trouble finds him, it’s never going to go away entirely.

It’s still frustrating, especially with Uraraka, Asui, Kirishima, and Tokoyami on their own internships. That’s only a quarter of the class, but it still feels to Shouto like everyone has something to do but him. The fact that Aizawa is periodically out of class on his own mission doesn’t help. Present Mic is fine as a substitute, but it’s still a harsh reminder of how behind he is.

Then Midoriya comes back to the dorms, and Shouto knows almost immediately that something’s happened. His first clue is that Togata is escorting him, hovering over him worriedly until he sees Midoriya off at the door. His second clue is that Midoriya promptly vanishes upstairs, without a word to anyone.

Togata leaves without saying much. Shouto sends his friend an invitation to study, hoping to find out what happened, but Midoriya brushes it off and that’s the end of that.

It’s odd, though. Shouto’s sitting on the couch when he feels a chill go by, not unlike a draft. It’s not a draft, of course; he’s felt this often enough around Midoriya to identify it as a dead person he can’t see or hear. He goes still, waiting for another feeling, or maybe a sign that

something is wrong and Shouto needs to go up and check on Midoriya more directly.

But nothing comes. Midoriya comes down later for dinner, with a calm smile on his face that tries to reach his eyes but can't quite make it.

The thing is, Ochako has an inkling of what's going on. The Dragon Heroine Ryukyu is on the Eight Precepts case, same as Deku's supervisor, so word gets back to them when the League of Villains launch an attack on one of Nighteye's secure buildings.

It doesn't take a genius to know that Deku was involved somehow. When Ochako gets the news, it's all she can do to keep from gnawing her fingernails to stumps.

Is it bad that she only *really* gets worried when she finds out he's been taken off duty? It can't be a punishment; she knows Deku, knows how determined he is, and it'd be impossible for him to give anything less than his best, especially when he has ghosts on his side.

But *something's* wrong. It has to be, for Deku to be this cagey afterward. He's not going out every day anymore, but it still feels like she hardly sees him, and when she does, he's staring off into space and muttering to himself.

She wonders who he's talking to.

Tenya has a strong feeling that Tensei isn't around quite as often.

He isn't sure why. He isn't sure it's possible for him to know with absolute certainty whether or not his brother's spirit is with him. It's just a feeling he gets, and while his logical side balks at classifying it with such vague terminology, there's no other way he feels comfortable describing it.

He's been feeling it just a bit less, lately.

And that's unfortunate, because something is wrong with Midoriya, and Tenya misses being able to whisper his fears in his empty dorm room while knowing it's not as empty as it seems. His attempts to broach the subject to his friend have been largely unsuccessful—and that's really not fair, because months ago Midoriya was the one to scold him for not asking for help when he was struggling.

He's not alone in feeling this way. Todoroki is worried, Uraraka is worried, and Togata-senpai seems worried as well, on the occasion that Tenya sees him.

But Midoriya won't say anything. Not to them, at least. He's talking to someone, though; Tenya sees it all the time, now that he knows that more than half of Midoriya's usual muttering isn't just "talking to himself". If he's not doing that, he's scribbling in his notebook.

Tenya has no idea what that's about. Midoriya flips it shut whenever anyone wanders within range.

Izuku is going over his notes again. Over the past few days, his allies have managed to put together a solid picture of what they're dealing with. Eri's father led them straight to the original headquarters where Eri was first kept, which was a solid start—but not quite enough. The Eight Precepts group has been pulling out, removing people, supplies, and assets out to a new location—several new locations. Izuku isn't exactly sure how many. When he is, he'll take it straight to Nighteye.

He feels the presence in his dorm room without seeing or hearing anything strange. A split second after the feeling touches his senses, Mika stirs in his lap and meows. Izuku turns around in his seat and sees a ghost.

Immediately his eyes are drawn to her left shoulder—or the spot where her left shoulder used to be. It's gone now, along with her arm and part of her torso. She carries herself awkwardly, as if the missing pieces have thrown off her balance.

"Hello," Izuku says, tearing his eyes from her wounds.

"Are you Midoriya?" she asks. In spite of her strange balance and missing parts, she carries herself with an air of poise. She looks to be in her late twenties to early thirties.

"That's me."

"Ingenium sent me," she tells him. "After a fashion. He said you were trying to bring down Overhaul."

Izuku pushes his chair out from his desk and turns around to face her fully. "And what if I am?"

She nods. "My name is Chuuza. Chuuza Junko. And… I was a

yakuza." Izuku tenses on instinct, but she shakes her head. "I know how that must sound to you. But if you knew more about what Overhaul has done, you'd know that means I'm on your side here."

"I don't understand," Izuku says warily. He's alone right now; all the ghosts are out gathering information. Rei usually checks in pretty frequently, but she isn't here yet. "Overhaul's the *leader* of the yakuza."

Her face crumples. "He's—he's a disgrace to the name. And even if he wasn't, a lot of Overhaul's victims are his own men. People who fail him, or people who held too tight to the old ways for his liking."

"The… old ways?"

Chuuza shakes her head. "Chisaki Kai was adopted by our boss as an orphaned child, raised in the family like the rest of us. And somewhere down the line he got it into his head that he had to rebuild the yakuzas. And that rebuilding the yakuzas was worth changing everything that we were supposed to be." She hesitates, hand twisting in the remains of her shirt. "A lot of people say the old families are a shadow of what they used to be, and maybe they—maybe we were. Maybe we are. But it means something. There's honor and integrity in staying true to ourselves, instead of becoming—*villains*." She shuts her eyes. "We don't take 'villain names'. That's not what we do. That's not what we are. But Chisaki poisoned the man who raised him like a son, then stole his position and started calling himself 'Overhaul'. It's a *disgrace*."

"He killed you for opposing him?" Izuku asks.

Chuuza is silent for a moment. "I bought into it," she says at last. "I was young, and the things he talked about—reclaiming our former glory, emerging from the shadows—it was nice, you know? I didn't realize what it really meant. But dying opened my eyes. I was loyal to him, I served him well, and he killed me for a single misstep. Just one failure. And--and I want him to pay." She stands taller. "So, I'll help you. If it comes to a battle, I know his usual tactics. I can be your eyes, if you'll let me."

Cautiously, Izuku nods. "I'll take any extra set of hands and eyes. Overhaul's going down."

Chuuza's face lights up eagerly. "I look forward to it."

"Well then." Izuku smiles. He's not sure which smile it is, the real one

or the frightening one. “Can you tell me if we’re missing any hideouts?”

The better part of a week passes before Nighteye can get a hold of Eraserhead. The latter has spent most days since the League’s attempted capture of Eri to dive deep into his usual sources, keeping his ear to the ground and monitoring villain movements every hour that he isn’t teaching classes or sleeping. While Nighteye is grateful for his efforts, it can’t be healthy, and he’s been impatient to speak to him.

As it is, he’s a few minutes late to the meeting that Nighteye finally manages to schedule. He walks into Nighteye’s office muttering an apology that’s little more than a platitude, but Nighteye takes it at face value. When heroes, especially underground heroes, have that frayed sort of look about them, it’s better to heckle them as little as possible.

For nearly an hour they go over the results of Eraserhead's investigation, and Nighteye is simultaneously thankful for the information and frustrated that there isn't more of it. “It's not as concrete as I'd like,” Eraserhead tells him, glaring down at his half-empty water glass as if he blames it for his hardships. “Mostly rumors and hearsay, and many of them contradict each other. But that's what I could dig up.”

“I was afraid of that,” Nighteye says acidly. “But it's better than nothing." He places the intelligence report in his hand to the side. "If you've nothing more to share, I did want a word with you about Midoriya Izuku.”

“Oh, good.” Eraserhead sounds almost relieved. “Because I have questions.”

Nighteye frowns. “Questions?”

“Well.” Eraserhead sits forward, letting his elbows rest on the far side of Nighteye’s desk. “In case you were wondering, the *reason* I was late today is that a few of my students stopped me on the way out the door to bring up his recent behavior. Technically it was nothing I didn’t already know, but it’s always nice to have more details.”

He doesn’t like where this is headed. He took the boy off duty to *avoid* having to worry about him. “What sort of behavior?”

“Withdrawing, avoiding socializing, vanishing into his room and refusing to come out,” Eraserhead replies. “There’s been an uptick in avoidance behaviors since Compress and Toga made their move. I’m still hearing him speak, though. At least there’s that.”

“He needs counseling for what happened in Kamino,” Nighteye says bluntly. “The events of last week may have exacerbated the lingering trauma. And by ‘may have’, I mean ‘definitely’.” He sighs harshly. “He didn’t inform me of his severe claustrophobia before he ended up facing Compress.”

Eraserhead tenses visibly. “Maybe you should start from the beginning.”

He does so. Nighteye isn’t one for sugarcoating, and he knows that Eraserhead isn’t, either. He delivers it as he would any report, going through the events of that day one by one—the unexpected change in sentry duty, Midoriya’s arrival at the secure location, his call for help, and the ensuing battle as best as he can present it when he didn’t participate himself. Eraserhead’s expression doesn’t change as he listens.

“Bubble Girl was good enough to have them wait for me somewhere quiet,” Nighteye finishes. “When I got to them, Midoriya was temporarily mute and had Mirio translating as he gave his report in sign language. I've had him off active duty since. Sending him back out into the field after that would do far more harm than good.”

Eraserhead purses his lips thoughtfully. “It explains a lot, but not all of it. He’s especially close to a select few of his friends, and if it were only trauma then he’d be surrounding himself with them, but those few were the ones to tell me he was isolating himself, so unless it slipped your mind to tell him he did a good job, it doesn’t make sense.”

“Unless it—” Nighteye pauses. “Pardon?”

The underground hero blinks at him, and his eyes narrow. “Please tell me it didn’t slip your mind.” Nighteye stares at him, not sure how to respond to that, and Eraserhead sighs harshly and puts down the glass he’s been toying with. “It slipped your mind, didn’t it? You removed him from active duty and didn’t tell him it wasn’t a punishment.”

Nighteye bristles. “Why on earth would it be a punishment?” he asks. “He did everything right—he alerted me as soon as he realized something was wrong, called for backup, and successfully held off the

villains until said backup arrived. There's nothing in that worth punishing."

"Obviously. But forget for a moment that we're both rational minds, and remember that we're talking about your former boss's favorite student." Eraserhead ignores Nighteye's sharpened glare. "I've been trying to train him out of thinking that success doesn't count unless he does everything by himself, but every now and then he backslides on it. My advice to you is—let me guess, you sent him home and haven't spoken with him since except work e-mails, right?" Nighteye nods, feeling uncomfortably judged. "Then talk to him. Take him aside and go over what happened. That kid—well. I won't say he cares too much, because there's no such thing as a hero who cares too much. But he takes on too much by himself. Take him aside and spell it out that he isn't a colossal fuck-up, he did everything he was supposed to do, and if he doesn't give himself a break he'll be no use to anyone. Considering how far you've taken Togata Mirio, I don't think I need to tell *you* that constructive criticism is useless without positive reinforcement." This conversation is beginning to feel suspiciously like a scolding. "I know things are tense and the world is falling apart, but try to remember that you're teaching a kid."

No ordinary teenager, Nighteye bites back. He took quite the leap, from training someone like Mirio, to training a boy who's constantly two steps ahead because spirits are feeding him lines. Not that Eraserhead would know that.

"Don't give me that look," Eraserhead says flatly, at the same time as he misinterprets whatever look he's seeing. "You had All-Might's ear for five years. If anything, you're uniquely qualified to deal with Midoriya's self-destructive martyr tendencies."

"The boy may admire him, but there's a world of difference between the two," Nighteye says, before he can stop himself. "I'll speak with him, of course, but… it's not that simple."

Eraserhead studies him for a moment, with a look on his face like he's just discovered a bit of evidence that he'd missed. Before Nighteye can worry that he's let something slip, there's a knock at his door.

"Come in," he says, eager for even a momentary distraction. And because he has the worst luck in the world, Midoriya himself steps through, dressed in normal civilian clothes, with nothing but a single notebook tucked under his arm. Upon seeing Eraserhead, he stops short.

“Sorry for interrupting,” he says. “I can wait.”

“What is it, Midoriya?” Nighteye asks. The sight of him fills him with foreboding, and he’s not sure if it’s the usual dread or something new.

“I can wait until you’re done,” Midoriya says. “I just wanted to give you something.” ‘Something’ being the notebook in his hands, no doubt.

“What is that?” Eraserhead asks, frowning again.

“Just notes,” Midoriya replies.

Notes on what, Nighteye is almost afraid to ask.

“That’s odd,” Eraserhead says, raising an eyebrow. “Nighteye just finished telling me that you’ve been off duty all week."

Midoriya looks at him with bland, innocent eyes. “Oh, well, yes. And I’ve been staying out of trouble like he said.”

“That’s not very reassuring, Midoriya,” Eraserhead tells him.

“Sorry,” Midoriya says, backing toward the door. “You don’t have to worry, though. I haven’t left campus all week.”

“That would be convincing,” Eraserhead says dryly. “If I didn’t watch you use that exact tone with Shigaraki to stall him at the USJ. You want to try that again?”

Midoriya halts in his tracks.

“Midoriya?” Eraserhead prompts.

The boy takes a few moments to reply. Nighteye doesn’t like the look on his face. He looks *unsettled*, and the only time Nighteye has seen him look anything but calmly knowing or irritated was last week, while he gave his report in sign.

“Could—” Midoriya’s voice cracks. “Could you repeat that, sensei?”

Eraserhead frowns. “You used that same tone when you stalled Shigaraki Tomura at the USJ. It was very impressive, but it also showed me quite a few of your tells—”

“Sensei.” Slowly, Midoriya shifts his weight from one foot to the other. His face is frozen-blank. “Do you remember what happened before I

did that?"

The frown deepens. "I don't see how that's—Midoriya, what's the matter?"

"Humor me," Midoriya says. "What happened before I stalled Shigaraki?" His throat bobs as he swallows.

"You... came up to the plaza while I was holding them off." Eraserhead says slowly, chewing over each word.

"You were there," Midoriya says softly. "So why was I the one stalling him?"

A split second after the question leaves Midoriya's mouth, the glass slips from Eraserhead's hand. The carpeted floor is just enough of a cushion to stop it from breaking on impact.

Nighteye is on his feet in an instant, alarmed. Midoriya stares at his teacher, speechless with shock. Eraserhead looks like his life is flashing before his eyes.

"This doesn't make sense," he says. "The Noumu—but I *remember*—"

Midoriya's eyes flicker to Nighteye for a split second, looking almost apologetic.

"I stopped Shigaraki from using his quirk on you and Asui," Eraserhead says. He doesn't seem to have noticed the dropped glass. "And then the Noumu bashed my skull into the floor and I woke up in the hospital. But I remember—I *saw* you. I talked to you, and you talked back."

Midoriya is looking at the floor now, spine rigid. "What did I say?"

"You told me not to worry." Eraserhead's eyes are fixed on him. "That no one had to die. Midoriya—"

"You weren't dead," Midoriya says. He says it abruptly, in a rush of words, as if he's forcing it out before he can lose his nerve. "Not quite. But you were close. Close enough for me to see you."

Eraserhead doesn't answer.

"I haven't—" Midoriya shoots another split-second look at Nighteye. "I haven't been honest with you, about my quirk. But things are different now, and I should've told you before."

His hands curl into fists, and the change that follows is so smooth that Nighteye almost misses it. His stance shifts, the troubled look on his face vanishes, and in an instant he's cold and composed again, the way he always is when his quirk presents itself.

"I see ghosts," Midoriya says. "Spirits of the dead. I've been talking to them a lot lately—that's what the notebook is. After theLeague almost took Eri, I figured they'd try again, so I reached out." His mouth is set in a grim line. "Overhaul's killed a lot of people, and most of them are happy to help. So I've been asking them things. For information. Where his bases are, how many people he has, what they've been doing, stuff like that."

Nighteye sighs harshly. This is his own fault. He hasn't properly considered the implications of Midoriya's quirk—of what he can *do* with it. "You should have discussed this with me first, Midoriya."

The boy shrugs one shoulder. "I wanted to keep being useful," he says to Nighteye. "I've been stupid not to think of this before. When I say he's killed a lot of people, I mean a *lot.* Overhaul and his men can't blow their noses without at least one of them seeing it."

"That isn't the point—,"

"I'm gonna need you to back up," Eraserhead says. It's hard to place his tone. It's not quite as flat and emotionless as it usually is, but he's not angry or upset. There's a quiet intensity to it all the same.

"You don't believe me," Midoriya says. "Do you?"

"Midoriya—"

"That usually happens." The boy turns back to face him. "What will it take? Is there anything I can say to you that will make it easier to believe?"

Eraserhead's frown deepens, and Nighteye doesn't blame him. The man has spent the latter part of the meeting defending Midoriya, and now he's forced to place the burden of proof on him for a claim that isn't easily tested.

Midoriya's eyes shift away from Eraserhead's face. For a moment he seems to be waiting for something, before he looks at his teacher again. "I can tell you about the ghosts following you, if you want. You might remember Narita, if you remember the USJ. Narita Yuuto?"

Eraserhead pauses. “I’ve never met anyone with that name.”

“No,” Midoriya concedes. “You haven’t. You met his sister Kanon.” Eraserhead stiffens. “You saved her from the serial killer that murdered her brother. He was following his killer, and he saw you save her, and leave before she had the chance to thank you.”

There’s a wary look in Eraserhead’s eyes now. “That made the news,” he says hesitantly. “It would take some digging, but that information is available.”

“What about Kitayama Ai?”

Eraserhead breathes in sharply.

“A bridge was destroyed, and her car went underwater,” Midoriya continues. “You broke through the windshield to get her out, but her seatbelt got stuck. She says she had to hit you to get you to leave her and get her son out of the backseat instead.”

Eraserhead’s knuckles are white.

“She squeezed your hand before you let her go,” Midoriya says. “She did it to let you know it was all right and she didn’t blame you, but she was never sure you understood—”

“Midoriya.” Eraserhead’s voice cuts through his, and the boy falls silent. “That’s—you can stop there. I believe you.”

Midoriya falls silent. Waiting.

“This… this makes more sense than it should.” Eraserhead’s dark eyes flick toward Nighteye’s face, as if checking him for a reaction.

“I get that a lot,” Midoriya answers.

“The only question this raises,” Eraserhead says slowly. “Is about the quirk that I’ve been watching you use since I first met you.”

Midoriya hesitates, but in Nighteye’s opinion he doesn’t hesitate nearly long enough before he answers, “That’s a different quirk. I wasn’t born with it. All-Might gave it to me before I started school.”

“*Midoriya*—” Nighteye says sharply.

“Nighteye.” Eraserhead gets up from his chair. “Something’s just come up, and I’m going to need to cut this meeting short. Remember what I

said to you earlier. Sorry to rush out." With that, he leaves.

The moment the door is closed, Nighteye turns sharply to Midoriya, only to find him on the phone.

"Sorry, just a second, I have to warn him," Midoriya says, holding the phone to his ear. Then, "Hey, All-Might, it's me. No, everything's fine. Sort of. I just told Aizawa-sensei about my quirks. Yeah, both of them. I think he's on his way to you. …Yeah, brace yourself. Good luck." He hangs up.

Nighteye opens his mouth to voice his concerns, vehemently.

"I think I should have told him sooner," Midoriya says. "Aizawa-sensei's just as involved in teaching me to be a hero as All-Might is. I think it'll help in the long run if he knows more about what he's dealing with."

"Still," Nighteye says tightly. "One For All has been a closely-guarded secret for generations. Divulging it is not a decision to be made lightly."

"I've been thinking about it for a while," Midoriya says. "And at the end of the day, it's my quirk. It's my decision to make."

"Right," Nighteye says, trying to force the sour note out of his voice. He doesn't know why he never expected Midoriya to be so cavalier about One For All, when he's casual enough with the unsettling implications of his own quirk.

"Besides, it has to be a little less dangerous now than before," Midoriya says. "With All For One being dead and all."

"I would have assumed that myself, if not for your original quirk," Nighteye points out. "Death doesn't mean the same for you as it does for everyone else. How certain are you that All For One won't be dangerous even dead?"

"His brother promised me he wouldn't be a problem."

It takes a moment for the implications of that to sink in.

"You mean you've met…"

"I've met two of my predecessors besides All-Might," Midoriya tells him. "Ms. Nana and the original—he didn't tell me his name. The rest

are already gone." He hesitates for a moment. "Can I be honest about something?"

"Why stop now."

"That's one of the reasons I was frustrated, meeting you," Midoriya says bluntly. "I never knew how to say it without it sounding arrogant. But it was frustrating that you thought I didn't deserve One For All, when I've met three people who had it before me and they all thought I was doing fine."

Nighteye's not sure what to say to that. He's not sure what he would have said if Midoriya had told him when they first met.

"Anyway, I just wanted to give you this notebook," Midoriya continues, dropping the object in question on Nighteye's desk. "It has everything I've gathered on Overhaul's operation so far. If it's not enough, I can get more out of the ghosts. They're happy to help, and I don't have to go against your no-active-duty orders to let them."

Which, of course, brings to mind what he and Eraserhead had been discussing before Midoriya's arrival, while also making him wonder if there's any point in bringing that up. "Seeing as how there are ghosts in the room," he says awkwardly—he'll never get used to saying these things out loud. "And two of them were apparently following Eraserhead… I don't suppose you already know what we were talking about, before you arrived?"

"They didn't tell me what you said," Midoriya answers. "Just that you had something to talk to me about."

"Ah." Of course it wouldn't be that easy. Nighteye considers sitting down for this, but decides against it. "Midoriya, do you know why I took you off active duty?" Midoriya blinks at him, and Nighteye shakes his head. "Let me rephrase that. Why do you think I made that decision?"

For a moment, Midoriya looks trapped.

"An honest answer, that's all I ask," Nighteye says, clinging to patience. "Speak freely."

"Because of the attack last week," Midoriya says warily. "I almost let Eri get taken, so you took me off to keep something like that from happening again."

Nighteye sighs, equal parts dismayed and exasperated. “You did everything you were supposed to do in that situation. I’ve kept you off active duty so that you could rest and collect yourself, not to punish you.” To his annoyance, Midoriya looks *skeptical*. “I thought my intentions were clear last week,” he says. “Regardless of my feelings regarding One For All’s placement, I am still responsible for you, for the duration of your internship.”

Midoriya averts his eyes. “Oh.”

An awkward silence stretches between them, and Nighteye finds to his frustration that, even with that confusion cleared up, the air still feels tense. But why wouldn’t it? Midoriya is no Mirio, and Nighteye is no All-Might. They haven’t seen eye to eye for two consecutive seconds since this internship started.

“Something else on your mind?” Nighteye asks reluctantly.

Midoriya considers him for a moment. “No, Sir,” he says at last, turning back toward the door.

“You’re sure about that?” Nighteye can feel his patience thinning. “If you have more concerns you’d like to express, you might as well take the time now.”

The boy halts. “I don’t think there’s anything to talk about,” he says.

“And yet you’ve stopped, and you’re talking now.”

Tension snaps into Midoriya’s shoulders, and Nighteye sees him force it out before turning around again. His hands are hidden in his pockets. “You don’t even like me,” he says. His voice is still calm, lukewarm to the point of being dismissive. “Ever since I started you’ve made it pretty clear you don’t want me here—and that’s fine. I’m fine with just making myself useful until my internship is over. At least then we’ll both get something out of this.”

His petulance has been testing Nighteye’s patience all month, but even this is pushing it. “Whether or not we get along is irrelevant to the work we do, Midoriya.”

“It comes up every time we talk,” Midoriya tells him. “So it kind of feels relevant.”

Nighteye presses his mouth closed. “I was under the impression that my opinion of you didn’t matter to you,” he says. “I have done my

best to remain professional, but if you find it difficult to do the same —"

"I'm not talking about One For All and whether you think I'm worthy or not," Midoriya says tightly. "I know *that* ship has sailed. I'm talking about the look on your face every time I talk about my *own* quirk." The indistinct shapes of his hands in his pockets shift, as if they're curling into fists. "You think I don't notice how much you hate it?"

"I don't hate your quirk—" Midoriya actually snorts at this, and Nighteye almost loses his patience entirely. "At worst I'm uncomfortable with the attitude it's given you, which, considering your position with All-Might and One For All, can I really be blamed?"

"All-Might has nothing to *do* with my first quirk, he didn't even know I had it when he gave me One For All—"

"Oh yes, I know about that," Nighteye says, more coldly than intended. "Do you think it's a point in your favor, that you kept something so vital from him when he entrusted his power to you?"

"I get it," Midoriya says tersely. "You're scared about the future you saw and you're scared of him dying. *I am too.* You don't think I get that?"

Nighteye opens his mouth, then shuts it again.

Midoriya's face changes. His sulky frown blanks out on his face. "You —" He stops short. "What, you *don't* think I get it? Is that what you're saying?"

If he were a more sensible man, he would end the discussion here and dismiss the boy. But the past weeks of tension and niggling have frayed his restraint to the snapping point. "I'm sure it concerns you," Nighteye says quietly. "In your own way."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Do you really want me to answer that, Midoriya?"

"Did I *stutter*?"

Nighteye sighs. He's going to regret this, he just knows it. "It's the nature of your quirk, isn't it?" he says wearily. "All-Might may die, but knowing him, his spirit would remain. So what would you really lose, in the end?" He pauses for an answer, and when he doesn't

receive one, continues. “It’s not something I blame you for. I don’t fault your conscience. It’s merely the nature of your quirk, and it can’t be helped. But it’s troubling all the same.”

And with that, it’s out. It should be a relief, to finally let the weight off his chest, but it only makes him feel cold.

“You…” Midoriya’s face shifts through at least a dozen different emotions, before finally settling upon cold shock and fury. “*That’s* why you hate me so much? You think I don’t *care?*”

“Midoriya, I don’t—”

“No, I’ve spent my entire life talking to ghosts and you think I don’t care when people die—you think I *don’t lose anything?* You think people die and I’m just *fine* with it?” His hands are out of his pockets, fists trembling at his sides. “What the hell do you think *makes* a ghost in the first place?”

Nighteye opens his mouth to reply, to try to diffuse this situation, but no sound will come out. The temperature in the room has dropped to sub-zero, goosebumps prickle over his flesh, and he finds that his voice will not obey him.

The cold composure of before is gone, scrubbed away to leave behind something open and raw and festering. “Do you think people leave ghosts behind when they die at a ripe old age in their sleep? They *don’t.*” His voice scrapes and cracks, like broken glass over pavement. “They die young, and they die *scared* and *angry* and *alone,* and most of them don’t get to leave pretty corpses behind. That’s my life, Sir, it’s been my life since I was three years old, and every time I open my eyes and see another walking corpse, I get reminded of how many people don’t get saved, every day, and it sucks, and *I hate it.*” His voice breaks. “I hate that they’re scared and I hate that they’re in pain, and I hate that I’m the only one who can do anything about it, and sometimes I *can’t* do anything about it!”

He breaks off, and the cold pressure on Nighteye’s throat is gone, but for the life of him he can’t think of anything to say.

It’s hard to think of things to say, in the face of a crying child.

“I didn’t come to you because I wanted your approval,” Midoriya says. “I didn’t come because of One For All, or because of All-Might. I came because I see things I *wish* I could forget, and I know things nobody else should know, and I can't make it go away because they're *people*

and they need my help and no one knows about them but *me*, because no one else has to see the things I see and—" He stops again, fighting against his own tears. "And I'm here because I thought—I thought maybe you'd understand."

Nighteye feels his heart plummet.

For a moment, the boy tries to steady himself, to pull together some semblance of his former composure. It doesn't work. After the third try, he gives up and draws his sleeve sharply across his eyes, as if furious with himself for losing control. "I did all of this wrong. I'm sorry. Once this internship's over, I won't bother you again."

He turns toward the door.

"Midoriya—" Nighteye starts.

The door shuts behind him.

It's instinct, not foresight, that makes Nighteye duck. Something whistles over his head, narrowly missing him, and he straightens up just in time to see a snow globe shatter against the wall.

Chapter End Notes

Content warning: selective mutism, discussion of trauma, self-blame, body horror/injury, past near-death experience, past deaths.

Posted from Tumblr, 3/23/19:

"The YUTS hiatus will be extending into April.

I will most likely be updating other fics here and there in the interim, depending on what I work on while I finish YUTS. Writing for multiple projects and switching between them prevents me from burning out, and the feedback from posting them keeps me going, too.

By the end of April, I plan to be finished writing out YUTS, and in return for your patience, the final five chapters will be posted weekly.

Thanks, guys!"

Chapter 56

Chapter Notes

> Holy wow! This has taken considerably longer than expected. I meant to buckle down and finish the rest of YUTS by the end of April, but a huge Moomin-shaped wrench was thrown into that plan, so here we are.
>
> Unfortunately, I don't yet have the rest of the fic written, but once I'd finished this and polished it I decided not to dawdle any longer on posting it.
>
> I know this is usually the place where I link a whole bunch of fanart, but guys... there's so much art. Luckily, one of the things I did over my impromptu hiatus was consolidate all the yuts fanart into its own tag. Here is that tag.
>
> As always, this story has a TV Tropes page!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Afternoon has turned to early evening by the time Shouta catches sight of Midoriya walking back to the dorms. It's actually hours after he should have been back; Midoriya texted him a while ago to let him know that he had fallen asleep on the train and missed his stop. That, and the periodic updates Midoriya had sent on his way back, is the only reason Shouta hasn't raised any alarms.

And so, against all odds, his student has come back in one piece, with no sign of him getting into a fight while Shouta wasn't looking. He is, however, holding a plastic bag from a corner store, and Shouta doesn't recall any mention of a grocery run in Midoriya's updates.

He's about to point this out when he sees the look on Midoriya's face. With a sigh, he intercepts his student before he gets to the door.

"Get those squared away, and then come back," he says. "I'd like a word." If it were anyone else, he would expect nervousness. But Midoriya simply nods and disappears inside.

Shouta takes him to one of the lounge areas in the teacher's dormitory. It's mostly empty, except for All-Might sitting stiffly on one of the couches, and Snipe, who sees Shouta coming and quickly excuses himself. Unlike the students' common rooms, this area is

easily closed off for the sake of privacy. They're going to need it.

All-Might sits up a little straighter when he sees Midoriya come in, which is a departure from how cowed he's looked since this afternoon. Shouta doesn't regret any of what he said, but he'd rather All-Might didn't keep cringing at him like he thought Shouta was going to start up that discussion again. He's said his piece, what's done is done, and it's time to move forward now that they're all relatively on the same page.

"What happened after I left Nighteye's office?" Shouta asks bluntly, once they're all settled and alone. With that single question, he has All-Might's full attention.

Midoriya shrugs. He won't look at either of them. "I stayed a little longer and Nighteye sent me home," he says. "Then I fell asleep on the train and missed my stop."

"That's what your text messages said," Shouta replies. "Want to tell me what actually happened?"

This time, Midoriya thinks his answer over before he offers it. "Just a misunderstanding," he says. "It's cleared up now, so there's no point in worrying about it. Am I in trouble for being late?"

"That entirely depends on why you were actually late," Shouta says. Midoriya doesn't answer. "I'm bound to find out eventually. You might as well save us both the time." He frowns. "I was discussing your internship with Nighteye before you arrived. If you're having problems—"

"If I was having problems, it wouldn't matter since my internship's almost over anyway," Midoriya tells him. "Also you didn't have to yell at All-Might for hiding my quirk. He didn't know about it until a month ago."

Shouta raises his eyebrows. It's an abrupt subject change, to show off a bit of knowledge Midoriya shouldn't have. If Shouta didn't know better, he'd say Midoriya was trying to throw him off on purpose. "If you know that much, then you'll know that my main point of contention was his failure to tell me, the person responsible for teaching you and evaluating your abilities, that you were coming to school with a quirk that you'd had for all of two months. I can guarantee that I would have adjusted your education accordingly had I known from the beginning."

“It turned out fine anyway,” Midoriya says.

Shouta zeroes in on Midoriya’s scarred hand, sharply enough that he knows the boy is following his gaze. “I beg to differ. In any case, it’s not a mistake I’ll be making again, which is why you’re here right now.” It’s easy to get to Midoriya’s level when he’s sitting. “I want to know as much about your quirks as I can—and I do mean both of them. All-Might has already told me about the one he gave you. I want to hear about the one you grew up with.”

“I told you everything at Nighteye’s office,” Midoriya says. “I see ghosts, I make them stronger, and with One For All I can make them visible. There’s not much besides that.”

“It’s not on any of your records,” Shouta says. “As far as I can tell, you were registered as quirkless until you were fifteen.”

“Hard to get registered for a quirk nobody believes is real,” Midoriya says flatly.

“Then I take it you haven’t seen a quirk counselor about it?” Shouta asks.

Midoriya stops avoiding his eyes and actually looks at him, surprised by the question. “What?”

“All children with quirks go through mandatory quirk counseling in grade school,” Shouta says patiently. “Without a registered quirk, you were excluded, correct?”

“Yes,” Midoriya says. “But…”

“Have you spoken to a quirk counselor at all about it?” Shouta asks.

Midoriya’s face scrunches up in thought. “Um… s-sort of?”

“Elaborate?”

“I mean, he was a quirk counselor,” Midoriya says. “I just… I don’t think his license was still valid when I talked to him.”

“He lost his license?” Shouta asks.

“No, he died.”

Shouta closes his eyes and counts to ten. “…Let’s back up for a moment.” *Ask a stupid question—*

“What happened with this particular ghost?” All-Might asks, as Shouta tries to get his thoughts together.

“Oh, he's long gone now,” Midoriya answers readily. “I met him when I was eight, a little after I… moved schools. I don’t really know where he came from, he just showed up one day and started doing counseling sessions with me. He didn’t know he was dead, so he was just doing what he was used to, and since I was the only kid who was answering him when he talked, he treated me like a patient.”

“That’s… rather unconventional,” All-Might says. Midoriya gives him a “what do you expect” sort of shrug.

“It did help, in the end,” he says. “I mean, I think he did a good job.”

Shouta frowns. “How so?”

“Well… ghosts are—I mean, they *were* —" Midoriya stops. "They’re just scary sometimes,” he says lamely. “Especially for me, at that point. I just… I was stuck with this quirk that nobody believed I had. I couldn’t turn it off. I couldn’t make myself *not* see it. And it was hard. It felt like I was spending every day surrounded by monsters that nobody else could see. Any one of them could hurt me if they wanted, and nobody would be able to do anything about it, and—that *scared* me.”

Shouta has a lot of thoughts. He doesn’t voice any of them, but nods for Midoriya to continue.

“They’d show up all the time, without any warning,” Midoriya says. “They’d try to talk to me, or grab me. Sometimes they’d go after me if I ran. I hated it, and there was no way to make it stop. But then Karasu-sensei changed things.” He pauses, hands tangling in his lap. “He asked me what they wanted.”

“What they wanted?” All-Might echoes.

“I didn’t know they wanted anything,” Midoriya says. “I never thought about it, and it never occurred to me to ask. So I started asking, and it turned out, a lot of them *did* want things. They weren’t trying to hurt me. They were trying to ask for help.”

“With what?” Shouta asks.

“Nothing bad, usually,” Midoriya answers. “Finding things, passing on messages, stuff like that. But that’s not important.” He pauses, hair

falling into his eyes. “When I knew how to help them, it was a lot easier to see them as people instead of monsters. So I kept doing it.” He takes a deep breath. “And that’s the real reason why I was late. A ghost needed a favor.”

“ *Midoriya* .”

“I didn’t go far, just a few of stops down. He lost his wallet.” Midoriya averts his eyes and fidgets again. “It helps me to be helpful. It made my quirk less scary, and more… normal. And now, when I'm being helpful, everything feels less scary and overwhelming. It works with helping living people, too.”

“Well, I’ve heard of worse coping mechanisms,” All-Might offers.

Midoriya half-smiles at that. “Anyway, that’s the closest I ever got to seeing a quirk counselor. Karasu-sensei finally figured out he was dead, too, which helped a lot of things.”

“It helped him to know that he was dead?” All-Might asks.

“He thought he was going through a rough patch in his marriage,” Midoriya says. “When he found out his wife was only ignoring him because she couldn’t see him, it took a lot of weight off his mind.”

His eyes flicker toward Shouta’s face, wary and watchful, as if keeping a close eye on all of Shouta’s reactions. He looks like he’s waiting for the other shoe to drop. Shouta isn’t sure what his student expects from him, but it probably isn’t anything good.

“One last question,” he says. “Does anyone else know?”

“My mom,” Midoriya says. “Iida, Uraraka, Todoroki, and… Bakugou. And Sir Nighteye.”

Shouta sighs, setting aside his annoyance that several students have been notified before him. “Here’s what’s going to happen, Midoriya,” he says. “Tomorrow, I’m making sure Iida and Yaoyorozu know to put you on extra classroom duty, for your unauthorized excursion today. In the future, if you have any pressing ghost-related issues that need resolving, you will notify me first. If you have any further developments in your quirks—and I do mean either of them—you will notify me as soon as possible. That goes for both of you.” He shoots All-Might a sharp look. “I want open communication from now on, and I won’t compromise on it. If that’s too much to ask, then you should probably find a different place to learn.”

All-Might splutters, but Midoriya just looks relieved. “I’m fine with telling you everything,” he says. “I’m sorry I didn’t do it sooner.”

“I don’t care one way or the other if you’re sorry.” Shouta gets up from his seat. “Don’t ever hide these things from me again. Training from an ignorant teacher with false knowledge about your abilities is worse than no training at all.” He holds Midoriya’s gaze for a moment longer, until he’s satisfied that his student isn’t shining him on. “All right, then. Go on, back to your dorm. Get some sleep.”

Midoriya complies without any fuss, and Shouta can only hope for the best, at least for now. You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it have a good night’s rest.

"You didn't press him on what happened with Nighteye," All-Might says, once Midoriya is out of earshot.

"Today has been a day for frankly unprecedented honesty from him," Shouta says dryly. "I'm not about to press my luck and risk having him shut down again. I'll keep an eye on the situation." He sits down with a heavy sigh. "I had a feeling he’d be the problem child of the class, you know. I just never realized how much.”

All-Might opens his mouth to reply, but a whisper cuts him off. Shouta doesn’t recognize the voice, only barely registers it as a woman’s, warm and amused.

“ *The best ones always are, wouldn’t you agree?* ”

When he glances at All-Might, confused, the other man looks as if…

Well. He looks as if he’s seen a ghost.

Nighteye mentioned hell freezing over when they last met, but the last thing Toshinori ever expects is to look down at his ringing phone and see his old friend’s name on the incoming call screen.

Pure, habit-driven instinct has him answering before his thoughts reach his hand. If Nighteye calls, then he has to answer, he has to know what’s wrong, he has to *help* —

He forces those feelings down. Nighteye hasn’t called him for something like that in a long time.

Silence meets his slightly stammered greeting. This is unusual;

Nighteye prefers not to waste time when making phone calls. He was like that even before their falling-out.

At last, Toshinori hears a quiet breath, then—

“ *Yagi* .”

Toshinori's pulse jumps. It’s the name, to start—a middle ground between the formality of addressing him by his hero name, and the closeness of first-name basis they once shared.

Since he first got in touch with Toshinori to inform him about Mirio, Nighteye has been… polite. He hasn’t been hostile, but his every word has pressed distance between them. Toshinori doesn’t blame him. He set that distance himself by walking away six years ago. He has no one to blame for that but himself, which doesn’t make it hurt any less.

But in two syllables, Nighteye brings back the open, raw emotion that he let show the last time they spoke face to face. It’s not a happy emotion, but—

“Is something wrong?” There must be something wrong, for Nighteye to sound like *this* when speaking to him, instead of aloof and formal.

“ *If it’s not too much of a bother,* ” Nighteye says, “ *can we talk?* ”

Toshinori knows better than to press him for details over the phone. “Of course,” he says, and to his own ears he sounds pathetically hopeful. Their last conversation didn’t end the way he would have wanted, but maybe now… “I’m free right now, if that’s best.” It’s technically true. It’s a school day, but Toshinori isn’t scheduled for any classes today. “Where would you like to meet?”

Silence meets his question again. Then—

“ *I could come to you?* ”

“Are you sure?” He would have thought—things aren’t even close to back to normal, they’ve played it safe by phoning each other from a distance or choosing neutral ground.

“ *I honestly don’t care where we meet,* ” Nighteye says wearily. “ *I just want to talk.* ”

This has something to do with whatever happened yesterday. It had to be something; Izuku has dodged every question about it, but Toshinori

knows that something shook him enough make break school rules for a coping mechanism. Something went wrong and now Nighteye wants to talk.

The hope that rises within him is sweet and merciless. “You could come around to UA,” he offers. “I’ll arrange a visitor’s pass for you. Give me a few minutes, and I’ll call you back.”

“ *Thank you,* ” Nighteye says, and sounds like he means it.

A quick call to Nedzu secures him the pass, and he calls Nighteye back to tell him he’s clear to come, though he’s fairly sure Nighteye is already on his way. He never did like to waste time.

“I’ll meet you outside the south side gate,” Toshinori tells him. “It’s closest to the faculty dorms. The other teachers don’t get in until late, so we won’t be disturbed."

“ *Is there any chance of us running into students along the way?* ” Nighteye asks.

“Maybe some upperclassmen?” On a hunch, Toshinori adds, “If you’re asking about young Midoriya specifically, then no. He’s on classroom duty today, so he’s not likely to be wandering around.”

“ *Ah. Good.* ”

“Good?”

“ *We* …” Nighteye sighs. “ *We didn’t part on a good note yesterday. If he were to see me now, it would only be an intrusion. I’d rather avoid that.* ”

“I see,” Toshinori says with a sinking heart. “Well. I’ll see you soon, then.” He hangs up, sets the coffee maker in the faculty dorm’s shared kitchen, and heads out to wait.

Nighteye has no right to be here.

He’s not being dramatic when he thinks that; being here, in Toshinori’s presence, in his space, is a privilege and not a right. If he hadn’t lost that right before, then he certainly has after yesterday. If he’d been more clear-headed he would have done what Toshinori had done and picked out somewhere comfortable and neutral for both of them.

But that’s the problem, isn’t it. He’s not clear-headed. It feels more and

more like he hasn't been in a long time. The only thing he's sure of is that Toshinori helps, and Nighteye loses nothing by asking.

Things aren't all right. Nighteye isn't all right. And the best cure he's ever known for not being all right is "Talk to Toshinori". Nighteye does his best to make things better for others, to keep spirits up and leave people better than he found them. He gives his all and still falls short, while Toshinori has always done it without even trying.

And so, here he sits with a mug of freshly-brewed coffee, looking across the table to his former friend and wondering how to tell him about his colossal failure.

"Nighteye—"

"I fucked up," Nighteye says, and winces.

"Oh," Toshinori says, blinking in surprise and a little bit of dread. "Deja vu."

"What?"

"It's not important," Toshinori says, shaking his head. "What *happened* , Nighteye? I know that Izuku was upset about something when he got back yesterday, but he wouldn't say why."

That ought to be a boon, that Toshinori doesn't know. It means this is the first he's hearing about it, and Nighteye can control the narrative if he wants. But that's not why he's here. He needs help, not validation. He needs the truth, no matter how unpleasant, and he can only have that if he offers it first.

So he does. He picks it out, piece by piece, and lays it bare at Toshinori's feet.

Toshinori's eyes are closed by the time he's finished. "Oh, *Nighteye* ," he says. He doesn't sound angry, as Nighteye had feared. He just sounds disappointed, which is somehow even worse. "What did you *think* was going to happen?"

"I don't know," Nighteye admits. "I don't know what I was thinking. I can only conclude that I wasn't." He covers his face with his hand, pushing his glasses aside to massage the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. "You were right, Toshinori, I didn't understand." He winces when he realizes what he just said; the name had slipped out so easily.

Toshinori, at least, doesn't seem to notice. "I should have told you," he says quietly. "I told his mother I'd be willing to lay down my life for Izuku if necessary—" Nighteye flinches. "—and she made me swear that I wouldn't. I spoke to her again after he told me the truth about his quirk. She said that dying was the cruelest way I could possibly hurt him." He purses his lips with disapproval. "Did you bother to ask him about his quirk before you threw out accusations like that?"

No anger, only cold disappointment. Nighteye grinds his teeth as the knife in his belly twists, but he doesn't complain. He doesn't have a right to, when this whole mess was entirely avoidable. "What do you want me to say?" he bursts out. "That I hurt and belittled a boy that I was supposed to be helping? That I've been terrified and angry for the past six years, and I took it out on him? That's what happened." His throat threatens to close off. "I can't justify that. I don't have any excuse. I don't *want* an excuse. I want to make it right."

He stops, then, leaning on the table in front of him more heavily than he was before. He's tired, he thinks. He's been tired for years, and now he's starting to wonder if Midoriya Izuku is even the first person he's made to suffer for it.

"That boy means a lot to you," he says. "Doesn't he."

Even without looking at Toshinori's face, Nighteye can feel the weight of his attention. "How much does Togata Mirio mean to you?"

How is he supposed to answer that? How is he supposed to describe the feeling of teaching someone—of dipping his hands in and helping to shape someone's future? How can he possibly put that kind of raw relief and catharsis into words?

Toshinori must take his silence as an answer, because he laughs softly at whatever expression is on Nighteye's face. "I always thought you'd make a good mentor if you put your mind to it," he says. "Glad to know I was right."

"I don't feel like one at the moment," Nighteye says, still staring down at his coffee. Before he knows it, Toshinori's hand is stretching into his line of vision, covering one of his.

"None of that, now," Toshinori says, gently stern. "Self-flagellation won't help anyone, least of all young Midoriya. Believe me, I should know." Nighteye reluctantly raises his eyes to Toshinori's face, questioning. "Remember when I mentioned deja vu? Well, I was an

utter novice of a teacher when I took him on, and I still consider myself a novice now. You think I haven't made my own mistakes? I let him injure himself repeatedly while he was learning how to control One For All. Several times now, I've forced him to work with someone who hurt and abused him in the past. I didn't know that at the time, but there was ample warning that I either didn't notice or actively ignored."

Nighteye thinks back to a conversation with Mirio, about teenage boys doing their best and feeling alone, *he wants to prove himself but he's also desperate to find someone who understands what he's going through.* He had asked for Mirio's input from his own mouth, and then brushed it off a moment later. "How do I fix this?" he asks.

"Be *better* ." Toshinori gives his hand a squeeze. "Be better than you were before. Everything you just told me, about how wrong you were and how much you regret it and wish you'd done it differently? Tell that to him, and then honor your own words. That's all you can do."

"Right." It's obvious. Or at least it should have been obvious. Maybe if he'd been thinking straight instead of slipping into self-flagellation, he would have come to that on his own. "Right, sorry, I don't know why I didn't think of that myself."

Toshinori sighs. He doesn't sound disappointed anymore. "You always did get lost in your own head when things went wrong."

"I guess I haven't changed much." When he says it out loud, it feels distressingly true. "Sorry to disappoint."

"I'm not proud of how I've been living these past years, either," Toshinori says.

Nighteye hears the olive branch and knows it for what it is. He's not sure that it would be right to accept it, after all this time, but… "I think we were each other's impulse control back then." He hates this, hates the feeling of walking on eggshells around someone he used to know so well. "Between my habit of overthinking and…"

"And mine of not thinking at all," Toshinori finishes for him. His hand doesn't leave Nighteye's. "It's been a while, hasn't it? Since we last did… this. The talking. It always helped before."

The memory squeezes Nighteye's chest like a vice. "It did," he says and the simple truth eases the pain. "I've missed it. I know, it's my own fault, but…"

Toshinori's hand squeezes his again. "I wasn't listening."

Nighteye looks up at him, surprised.

"I got caught up in my own head, in my own fear and despair, and I was so terrified of no longer being useful that I stopped listening to reason, I stopped listening to you, I just…" His voice trails off. "I stopped *listening* ."

A short, breathless wheeze of laughter escapes Nighteye. "Yes… I think I did all of that, too." He'd left, after all. Midoriya Izuku hadn't meant any of it at the time, but there had been some truth to it. He'd left, and he'd been too prideful to try to reach out on his own without pulling together some grand gesture, like finding a successor for him.

Toshinori purses his lips. "I don't know if I ever held that against you, but for whatever it's worth, I forgive you," he says. "Whether or not you forgive me is your business, but I'd like it very much if you could forgive yourself."

Nighteye doesn't know what to say to that. It's far too gentle for what he came here expecting. He's so caught up in trying to come up with a response that he doesn't notice Toshinori get up until his old friend is already next to him, drawing him into a hug. As easily as if the past six years never happened. For Nighteye's part, it's as awkward and borderline-frightening as the first time he ever did it.

"Of course," Toshinori goes on, without letting go. "That's just where *I'm* concerned. You said something very hurtful to Izuku, and he's not as good at hiding it as he thinks he is. If you don't make things right with him—or if you don't even try—well. I'm not sure I could forgive that. So keep that in mind."

"I'll talk to him," Nighteye promises.

"Good."

It's frightening, how much he'd forgotten how to feel safe.

Chuuza Junko is a lifesaver.

The fact that she's a villain (former villain?) isn't too much to get past. Okumura was one, too, and there were many others besides. Villains die just like everyone else, they have regrets just like everyone else, and Chuuza puts hers to good use.

With her help, Izuku has a better idea of how Overhaul's operation works, and that means he can go out and ask better questions. She's not the only dead yakuza underling unhappy with the current regime; there are plenty of malcontents who are only too happy to offer up information on Overhaul, his circle, and their current plans.

"Thank you for trusting me," Chuuza tells him one day, as he compiles more information to deliver to Nighteye.

"Thank you for helping me," he answers. "And for helping Eri."

The ghost hums quietly. "It's strange, spending time around people like you."

"People like me?" Izuku asks.

"People who care about little girls like Eri," Chuuza says. "People who would risk so much, just for the sake of a single child."

"No child deserves to grow up in pain and fear," Izuku says, turning back to his notes. "One of the many reasons I'm going to be a hero."

"It's not about what's deserved," Chuuza says. "It's about what matters, in the grand scheme of things. A single child in a big, rotten world."

"Well, that's what a person is, isn't it? A world," Izuku says, closing his notebook. He has permission from Aizawa to pay a visit to Nighteye's agency. If he hurries, he can make the early train. "Memories, and thoughts, and feelings. Hopes and dreams and stuff. So if I save one person, it's like I'm saving a whole world."

"Imagine saving a whole world's worth of people, then," Chuuza muses.

"That's the plan." Izuku heads out the door. "I mean it, though. Thank you. I don't know if I could've gotten this much without you."

The ghostly woman smiles. "It's worth it," she tells him. "I never thought I'd ever have a chance to make things right."

The trip to the agency is uneventful; too soon, Izuku finds himself walking into the familiar building, steeling himself for an awkward, hopefully brief conversation.

He means to leave his notes on Nighteye's desk and leave, so of

course, as he's turning away, Nighteye says, "Just a moment."

Izuku tries not to sigh. Rei gives Nighteye's desk lamp a casual swipe, making it flicker violently. Izuku can see Nighteye give a quick glance around, as if looking for the ghost responsible for it.

"Yes, Sir?" he says, a little reluctantly. He wants to leave. He's still mortified about the last time they spoke.

It takes surprisingly long for Nighteye to start speaking again. His hands are clasped in front of his face, his eyebrows drawn together in a pinched frown. More than once Izuku sees him open his mouth, close it again, and keep frowning.

He's considering the pros and cons of simply backing out and leaving when Nighteye finally speaks. "There are things that—" he stops. "What I mean to say is, it's difficult to explain…" Two false starts, then a third. Izuku sneaks a glance at Rei. She looks less than impressed.

"…I owe you an apology," Nighteye says at last.

"Don't hurt yourself," Izuku says dryly, then winces at his own loose mouth. Stupid comments at least half the reason things ended up the way they did.

So he's a little surprised when Nighteye kind of laughs.

It's only *kind of*, not a real laugh with happiness behind it, just a quiet huff of breath with something like bitter amusement. But it's also a far cry from the unimpressed silence from the first day they had met. It isn't a laugh, but it isn't not a laugh, either.

"I suppose I deserve that," Nighteye says.

Oh, *hell,* this is actually happening. "Sir, you don't have to..."

"I do, actually," Nighteye says firmly. "I really do. It's difficult for me not because you don't deserve it, but because I honestly don't know where to begin."

"Look, it doesn't matter, okay?" Izuku averts his eyes. "It's not like I told you why I picked you for an internship. That was my fault—"

"This isn't about what you wanted from me, or my ability to read between lines," Nighteye tells him. "This is about—" He stops again,

eyes closed. “This is about you deserving better from me in general. Not as a supervisor. Not even as a question of professionalism. Just… basic decency.”

“What does any of this have to do with basic decency—”

“*Because* —” Nighteye stops, clamping down on what may be a flash of temper, or embarrassment, or… Izuku isn’t sure. He doesn’t have Rei’s empathy quirk. The hero’s fingers drum on his desk until the sudden flare of emotion calms again. “I… have not dealt with you fairly, Midoriya. I have been dead set against you from the start, and I have been more focused on proving a point than making your internship useful for either of us—proving it to whom, I have no idea, but that’s not important.” He shakes his head. “I’ve been taking six years of unresolved conflict out on you, and that was wrong. You deserve far better, and it shouldn’t have taken so much for me to see what I was doing. It should never have gotten that far.”

Izuku stares at the floor as Nighteye falls silent, and he realizes distantly that it’s probably his turn to say something. He wishes he knew what—it’s not that his mind is blank, just that he’s too busy squirming with discomfort to think of the proper response.

He’s still not used to grown-ups with pulses apologizing to him and meaning it. Maybe he never will be.

At last, he offers a “Thanks. It’s… thanks.” He can’t say it’s okay, because it’s not. But Nighteye’s sorry, and maybe he’s even not going to do it again, and that’s a little better than having to grit his teeth and put up with bad blood like he’s been doing.

Nighteye nods, clears his throat, and shuffles through some papers on his desk. “I did have something else to discuss with you,” he says. “When I first put you on leave, I did specify a set period of time, which is coming to an end soon.”

Izuku stands a little straighter. “I can go back to active duty?” His internship is nearing its end, but it’s better late than never.

“Provided you pass a psych evaluation first,” Nighteye says. “For your own good, more than anyone else’s.”

“That’s fair,” Izuku says, hiding his reluctance.

Nighteye levels a steady stare at him. His earlier awkward humility is gone. “You’re sure? After what happened with Compress, I wouldn’t

blame you for needing more time."

More time, as if Izuku has been sitting around twiddling his thumbs since he got taken off active duty. As if Nighteye doesn't know perfectly well that he hasn't. "I'm sure," he says. "I want to see this through."

Nighteye holds his gaze for a moment more before nodding. "I'll let Eraserhead know, then."

"Aizawa-sensei?"

"Most experienced underground heroes are trained to give such evaluations," Nighteye says. "And it will make things a great deal less complicated if we're all on the same page, regarding quirks."

"Understood." Izuku hesitates. "Thank you, Sir Nighteye." His eyes flicker toward the empty spot on the shelf in the far corner. "Sorry about your snow globe."

Nighteye waves off the apology and sends him on his way.

"Well that could've gone a lot worse," Nana says, a little too brightly. "Considering where it started."

"He didn't say anything about what I said before," Izuku muses, clipping on an wireless earpiece so he won't get weird looks from the other train passengers.

"How do you mean?"

"About… why I picked him," Izuku says. "What I wanted his help with."

"Ah." Nana nods. "You expected him to offer to make up for it? Invite you to ask for his advice on how to deal with seeing things no one else can?"

"I don't know if I expected it." Izuku purses his lips. "I just…"

"Did you want him to offer?"

"No," Izuku says decisively. "Definitely not. It would've been weird. After everything that's happened… I don't know, I can't just talk about that with him." That would be delving into some very heavy, very personal business, and Izuku… can't. He just can't, not with Nighteye. It's one thing to talk to Todoroki, who exudes security like

an aura, or All-Might who's shared secrets with him from the start, or even Aizawa-sensei who's been as steadfast and trustworthy a teacher as Izuku ever could have hoped for. Nighteye isn't any of those things.

Yet, a small voice suggests.

"Well then," Nana says with a smile. "There you are. Sir Nighteye's a lot of things, but he isn't stupid. He's bound to realize all that, and after everything that's happened, he'd be an arrogant idiot to try to push forward anyway." She drapes a pale arm over Izuku's shoulders, squeezing lightly. "If I were in his position, I'd let you set the pace, so maybe that's what he's doing. Go at your own speed. Or don't go at all —your internship's almost over, and then you'll never have to talk to him again if you don't want to. You have time to decide, kiddo."

That's the most comforting thing Izuku has heard all day.

"I need you to understand something," Shouta says as he signs off on Midoriya's psych evaluation.

His student's eyes flicker down to the forms, as if double-checking to make sure he really has passed, and Shouta really is approving it. He meets Shouta's eyes again warily.

"I don't like this," Shouta goes on. "If I could have my way, you wouldn't be directly involved in what comes next." He knows a little of what Nighteye has planned, and it's not a bad plan—Nighteye's never are—but it is a dangerous one. "You would have more time off from field work, and proper counseling." The boy winces.
"But," Shouta continues wearily. "I know you too well."

He braces himself for a snide remark, maybe something about how he didn't know Midoriya nearly as well as he thought he did, but Midoriya stays silent.

"You were taken off duty by your supervisor, and your response was to follow his orders to the letter and *still* involve yourself so deeply in this mess that I genuinely wouldn't know how to start extracting you from it."

Midoriya has the nerve to suppress a smile at this.

"I'm in a tough position, now," Shouta tells him. "I always know that I can't protect my students from the world, but… you have access to a world that I can't even touch. For all I know, if I were to deny you

this, they could give you a dozen different ways to go behind my back and put your safety on the line anyway, and I'd be helpless to stop you. So. To save us both the trouble, I'll clear you for field work, and make sure that when you inevitably start summoning ghosts, you're at least somewhere I can keep an eye on you."

He slides the forms across to Midoriya and holds his gaze for a moment.

"Got it, Problem Child?"

Sir Nighteye stands before a meeting room crowded with heroes. His own sidekicks are present, as well as Mirio and Midoriya. Seated beyond them are the rest of his growing operation. Eraserhead slouches in his seat close by. Fatgum is there with two of his own interns: Mirio's friend Suneater, and Red Riot who made a name for himself apprehending a man wielding both the Trigger drug and Overhaul's quirk-canceling serum. Ryukyu the Dragon Heroine is here as well, with her interns Uravity and Froppy, two of UA's brights up-and-comers; all in all, a decent showing from UA's hero students past and present.

The time for waiting and planning is rapidly drawing to a close. The information from both Nighteye's usual channels and now Midoriya confirm it. Part of Nighteye dreads the inevitable clash, and an equal part of him is relieved that it will soon be over, one way or another.

He's been outlining their situation for the past twenty minutes, and the faces watching him hold nothing but determination for the task ahead. He wouldn't have chosen these people otherwise.

"The problem is that Overhaul's factions are growing in reach," he says. "They may not have the social power they once did, but they do have connections, and access to vital information. That's the hazard of an enemy that falls out of the public consciousness and survives underground. What's more, their alliance with the League of Villains is confirmed, and while All For One is no longer in the picture, we still don't know what resources they've retained."

"Meaning they'll eventually find out where we're keeping the girl," the hero Rock Lock says. He's been tense for the whole meeting, and Nighteye doesn't wonder why. The man has a baby at home, after all.

"Wrong," Nighteye says. "They already know. At this point her greatest defense is that they can't reach her. But our sources indicate

that Overhaul is amassing what power he does possess, and positioning his pieces around her location. We're doing our best to keep him away from the most strategic positions, but in regards to his making a move to recapture Eri… it's a question of when, not if." Nighteye presses his glasses back into place. "In fact, it's not even that, anymore. Sources that I can't name have narrowed down the date on which he'll attack." Spies who can only be detected by one person are terrifyingly useful. They are very lucky that Midoriya Izuku is devoted to being a hero.

"Let me guess," Eraserhead says flatly. "This means we can't move her, either."

Nighteye nods grimly. "Not without risking open war in the streets. And besides, if we move her then it gives them an opportunity to follow and eventually find the next place we hide her, and the next…" The line of his mouth tightens. "Please keep in mind. This is a child. A six-year-old girl. To spend her childhood locked away or on the run… that is no way to grow up. This stops here, and it stops now, while we have enough information to counter their invasion."

"Here, here!" Fatgum calls out. A few others echo the cry.

"That's all very well," Ryukyu says. "But how, exactly, do we plan on countering it? If his forces are spread out, then attacking them all at once seems difficult without risking them communicating with each other." Her eyes narrow. "The two-pronged strategy at Kamino was complicated enough, and we all know the price that carried."

Three interns wince: Midoriya, Kirishima, and Uraraka. Ryukyu must not know that her own intern was involved more directly in Kamino than she ought to have been, or else she might not have spoken of it so lightly.

"We won't be launching an attack," Nighteye said. "Overhaul will. Right into a trap of our own making."

Silence falls over the room as the gathered heroes mull over his words. The only one who doesn't look thoughtful is Midoriya, doubtless because he already knows exactly what Nighteye is talking about.

"Wait," Rock Lock says, eyes narrowing. "Are you telling me we're setting a trap for villains, and using a little girl as bait?"

"I'm saying that we're mounting a defense instead of an offense," Nighteye tells him. "The villains will come, that much is clear. But

thanks to our intel, we know when, where, and how, and will therefore be ready."

Rock Lock scowls. Nighteye doesn't blame him; there's no such thing as a perfect plan, and there's plenty that Nighteye doesn't like about this particular one.

But it's the only one that has any hope of guaranteeing both victory and finality.

"Nervous?" Nighteye asks, before Mirio has left for the day.

"No more than usual," his protege says brightly. "You always come up with the best strategies, Sir."

From anyone else, such a statement would sound like flattery. From Mirio it sounds like a simple fact. Nighteye isn't sure how he does it, but everything Mirio says sounds like that. If it comes out of Mirio's mouth, it's straightforward, honest, and uncomplicated. Nighteye knows for a fact that it's not something Mirio ever learned from him.

"I'm glad you and Midoriya are getting along," Mirio continues blithely, either missing or pretending not to notice Nighteye sputter over it. "I was a little worried for a while, but. Better late than never, I guess."

"Yes, well," Nighteye says at length. "Things got out of hand, I'll admit. But I came to realize that I wasn't taking your advice, even though I had asked for it in the first place."

"Oh." Mirio's cheeks darken. "Oh, I'm sure I didn't—I mean, anyone could've—"

"Don't let me catch you selling yourself short," Nighteye says in a mock-scolding tone.

Mirio grins. "Right. Sorry, Sir, won't happen again." He shrugs into his jacket. "Do you need anything from me before I go?"

"Not that I can think of," Nighteye replies. "Go, before you miss a curfew."

"Thanks, Sir. Oh, I almost forgot—my internship for the term is almost up, but is there still space for winter?"

Nighteye frowns. "You're sure you should be worrying about that? That's the last term before you graduate. You'll want to focus on exams, I would think."

"Oh, I will be." Mirio smiles ruefully. "If I can't manage to get an internship, that'll be all I do. Our teachers are already starting to drop hints about drilling us, and I'll need to break it up with something I love doing, or I might just crack. Please? If nothing else, it'll remind me why all the cram sessions are worth it."

For a moment, Nighteye can only gape at him. He wasn't expecting an honest-to-goodness heartfelt conversation today. He isn't at all prepared.

Mirio's grin turns impish. "Did I lay it on too thick?"

"Little bit." Nighteye takes the offered chance to spin it into something flippant. "I mean, really. As if *you* would have any trouble managing to convince pro heroes to work with you."

His protege beams. "Well, I learned from the best."

"Bah." Nighteye returns to his papers. "You're always welcome here. You know that. And I'm sure you don't need my help filling out the paperwork."

"I'm serious," Mirio says earnestly. "I wouldn't have made it this far without you, Sir."

"You made it this far because you made the effort," Nighteye says, trying to match the matter-of-fact simplicity that Mirio wields so easily. "I didn't force that from you. You did that all on your own."

It's only as the words leave his mouth, that he realizes how incredibly, bewilderingly true they are.

Mirio is going to be a great hero—though that was never in question. But he's come so far in the short time that Nighteye has known him, from a boy who could barely control his own quirk to a masterful combatant with or without it. And he's done it through his own desire, his own will to keep moving forward and fighting and striving—his own, and no one else's. He's never needed anyone's power but his own.

Mirio's going to be a fantastic hero, without One For All. That was always going to be true. He doesn't need Foresight to know that. He

can see it unfolding right in front of him; he's seen it every day since the moment he first laid eyes on him.

His protege leaves for the day, heedless of what he might have had in a future that never was, unaware of Nighteye's quite little revelation. Nighteye smiles over his work as something settles within him, something very much like peace.

For the first time in six years, the path ahead is clear.

Everyone and everything is precisely where they need to be. The future is theirs to shape, and they're going to make it a bright one.

Chapter End Notes

> CW: nothing serious, this chapter, just several awkward apologies for past poor behavior.
>
> Sorry this chapter's mostly filler, but Nighteye refused to stop having heartfelt conversations with people.

Chapter 57

Chapter Notes

> Quick warning for a scene in this chapter involving Toga Himiko. Honestly I'm not even sure what to warn for, but it's creepy and involves some nonconsensual touching and obsessive behavior. It starts at "Dazed, he loses his grip on One For All," and ends at "Toga screams."
>
> Thanks to Tori10 for beta-reading this chapter!
>
> Fanart tag
>
> TV Tropes page

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One morning Aizawa-sensei walks into the classroom in the middle of Midnight's history lecture. He doesn't say anything, nor make any noticeable gesture. But as soon as he steps inside, four members of the class quietly get up, pack their things, and follow him back out. The rest don't think much of it; internships are internships, and it's not the first time it's made them miss class.

Uraraka and Kirishima keep shooting glances at each other, at Aizawa, at Midoriya and Asui. Their energy is high, and it shows. Asui is as calm and silent as Aizawa, facing forward with a stony expression.

Midoriya's eyes flicker from side to side. His lips move, as if he's trying to voice his thoughts aloud.

It's time.

One would think an abandoned Metro tunnel to be the perfect spot for a villain's lair, but it serves the heroes' purpose just as well. Years of disuse show in the entrance alone. It's filthy and dank. This place hasn't been touched by a janitor's broom in a long time.

Past an unassuming door with a coded, fingerprinted lock, the place transforms. The filth is gone, the air is clean, and beyond the first hallway it opens up to a proper hero facility. The old tunnels have been renovated in past years, shaping the formerly derelict tunnels into a hidden base of operations.

It's a pity that today's events will most likely expose its existence. But if that's the price for bringing down a man as dangerous and ruthless as Overhaul, then the heroes will happily pay it.

There is only one point of entry, and Ochako can see it from where she stands with Tsuyu, Nejire-senpai, and Ryukyu before them. For all intents and purposes, they're on the front lines. When Overhaul and his people come calling, they'll be the first to know—at least according to Sir Nighteye's intelligence reports.

Deku hasn't said it outright, but she knows that most of that intelligence has to come from him. And yet no one is surprised about how much Nighteye knows about what's to come. Deku is scary, but Sir Nighteye must be pretty scary, too.

She takes a deep breath to settle her nerves. It's a mixed blessing to be at the front of the action. They're guaranteed to be in danger, but the escape routes are easiest to reach from their position. The deeper you get into the base, the easier it is to get stuck in the dark with no way out. And that's where Deku, Kirishima, Togata-senpai and Amajiki-senpai, Aizawa-sensei, and most of the other heroes in this operation are.

The warning goes out—" *Villains incoming, brace yourselves,* "—before an explosion reaches Ochako's ears, and a towering juggernaut of a man bursts in at the head of a wave of villains.

Ochako braces herself, readies her quirk, and takes her position as Ryukyu grows, and grows, and grows.

There's a reason they were put in this room instead of deeper in. It's the only one that can fit the Dragon Heroine's full wingspan.

Just a few minutes ago there had been a very unassuming door with a rusted keypad that looked decades old. Now there's a gaping hole big enough to fit ten men standing shoulder to shoulder. Masked yakuzas pour through, most of them with their quirks already activated. There's a lot of hooting and hollering involved. Not so much organization.

Himiko watches them thunder into the hero base, pushing and shoving and climbing over each other for the chance to get in first, and blows the longest, loudest raspberry she can.

" *Laaame* ," she says, and if it weren't for the fact that Tomura was

standing so close, he wouldn't be able to hear her over all the yelling. "I can't believe Overhaul has that big, fancy quirk, and all he's using it for is opening doors."

Tomura grunts. "He's leaving all the hard work to the NPCs," he says. "Pretty simple. Bring in a bunch of cannon fodder to make a lot of noise, make everyone think that's all you got. Hide the bosses in the grunts so the enemy team can't tell which is which 'til it's too late."

"Ohhhh." She draws out the noise, as loopy and sing-song as she can make it. "That's pretty smart," she says, reluctantly.

"Not really," Tomura spits. "Didn't work when *I* tried it. Don't see why he thinks it'll work for him." He snarls quietly. "He thinks he's *better* than us."

"Yyyep," Himiko says, popping the p between her lips. "I bet that's why he's trying to be our boss, huh?" The thought gives her the giggles. Overhaul, boss of the League of Villains. It's really kind of funny!

Even funnier is that they said yes, and Overhaul even believed them, after what he did to Magne-chan. One second she was talking, and the next she was a pair of legs and a splatter on the wall, before anyone could blink. He did that to her, in front of them, didn't try to fix it or even say sorry, and he thinks they're going along with him just like that.

That's the problem with people who use lots and lots and *lots* of pawns. Sometimes they forget which ones are important, too.

Tomura grunts again. "You know what to do?"

It's a good thing the yakuzas are yelling so loud. It means that none of them see Himiko's excited little dance, or hear her sing, " *Sabo-taaage!* "

Their main goal, Tomura says, is to take out the competition. And hey, why not grab the anti-quirk serum and kill a few heroes on the way out?

Plus, Himiko thinks, *plus* , she has enough of Izu's blood to take the little girl, too. The Doctor may be gone, but the doctor was nobody special, just a man who was very smart and very ambitious, and smart, ambitious men are a dime per dozen. The Doctor was one and he's gone, Overhaul is one and he'll soon be gone, too. They're bound

to find someone who knows what to do with little Eri-chan.

“Ohhh, I wish Mr. Compress was here,” she says. “It would be so *easy* with him.” He’s so quick, and his quirk would make it easy to take Eri-chan out from under everyone’s noses.

And…

“Izu-chan’s here,” she says, a breathy little whisper that’s almost a giggle. “I know it. Mr. Compress is so good at making him behave.” Izu is so tricky without Mr. Compress around. She thinks—knows?—it’s so *obvious* —Izuku knows her. She’s not sure, she doesn’t have proof, but she just knows that no matter what face she wears, he’ll always know her.

“Later,” Tomura snaps. “Kurogiri’s working on it. Focus on what we’re doing here.”

“Okay,” she says. “Can I go in now? I wanna catch up to Twice already.”

He grunts a third time, nods, and watches her slip in among the howling mob. She steals some blood here and there as she goes, just in case and just because.

She won’t need it. She has all the blood she needs for what’s coming.

The call goes out, and word spreads via radios and earpieces. The villains have made their move.

Instinctively, Shouta reaches out to rest his hand on Midoriya’s shoulder. He knows that his student has promised to behave, but he also knows that Uraraka and Asui are closest to the villains’ point of entry, and if anything bad happens to them, Midoriya will find out before he does.

“It’s Katsukame Rikiya,” Midoriya says. “One of the Eight Expendables. His quirk is Stamina Absorption. Overhaul likes to use him to break through defensive lines. Chuuza says he’s probably carrying a dose of Trigger just in case he needs that extra boost.”

Shouta nods, and passes the information along.

At the moment they’re alone (ghosts notwithstanding) and waiting for more information. The yakuzas will get past the first line of defense:

they're supposed to. According to Nighteye's plan, the heroes are divided into teams and positioned at strategic points throughout the base, in order to filter out more and more villains as they make their way deeper into the tunnels. The exceptions to this are Nighteye and Centipeder, who have Eri at the point farthest from the main entrance but closest to one of the base's many secret exists, Lemillion whose quirk allows him the mobility to run interference throughout the base, and finally Shouta and Midoriya. For now, they're hidden, so that Midoriya can keep feeding them with information from his network, and Shouta can wait for someone to get eyes on a priority target.

Their top priority is Overhaul himself. Right beneath him is Irinaka Joi, codename Mimic, who can inhabit and control objects—and under the influence of Trigger, can do the same with entire locations. And beneath both of them, but above the rest of the Eight Precepts footsoldiers, are the League of Villains.

Apparently, rumors of collaboration between the two forces are more than mere rumors.

In any case, Shouta's quirk makes him the best man for capturing any of these targets. Overhaul's quirk alone is far more potent than any other player in this conflict. The goal is for Shouta to get eyes on him as soon as possible.

Unfortunately, he's also rather unwilling to let Midoriya out of his sight. But they'll cross that bridge when they come to it.

The area they're in is empty to Shouta's eyes, but if Midoriya's near-constant stream of mumbling is any indication, they're absolutely swimming in ghosts.

It's almost comforting, in a way that Shouta tries not to read too much into. Is this how Midoriya behaves when no one's watching?

Then he remembers the muttering, and the half-disguised hand motions that Present Mic said were signs and fingerspelling, and all the times that Midoriya has laughed or switched moods for no apparent reason.

So maybe it's how he behaves when people *are* watching. Why would it matter? Of course no one's going to look at him and think, *ghosts* . They're just going to think he's weird.

"Mimic's in Tunnel 4W," Midoriya says suddenly, jarring Shouta out of his thoughts.

“You’re sure?”

“At least in the last five minutes.” His student’s eyes are bright and intent, focused on someone Shouta can’t see. “They didn’t see his body, but he’s making his way through by inhabiting a cloak and mask.”

Shouta hesitates. Logically Mimic’s body shouldn’t be far from the objects he’s possessing, but…

His thoughts are interrupted by Lemillion, who emerges from a nearby wall and zeroes in on Eraserhead. “Oh, there you are!” he says. “Mimic has been spotted in Tunnel 4W.”

“His body?” Shouta asks.

Lemillion smiles grimly. “Rock Lock found him. As far as we know, he hasn’t taken any Trigger yet. But Rock Lock’s radio was damaged in the fight, so he sent me to get you.” Lemillion doesn’t have a comm of his own; he can’t take any equipment through solid matter that isn’t made of his own hair.

“Deku,” Shouta says.

“I’m right behind you.”

“I’ll check in with Sir,” Lemillion tells them. “Good luck!”

Tunnel 4W isn’t far. It’s roughly halfway between the entrance and the chamber where Nighteye is holed up with the girl—that’s probably why Lemillion wants to check in with him. The villains are progressing, and Nighteye needs to be kept abreast of how close they are to reaching him.

If Mimic is that close, then Overhaul can’t be far away.

Midoriya starts to pull ahead. It’s not that he’s trying to take the lead, just that he doesn’t need to follow Shouta to know where to go. Whether it’s because of ghosts or because he, like Shouta, memorized the layout at the start, isn’t clear. Either way, Shouta reaches out to stop him before he overtakes him completely.

“Don’t rush ahead,” Shouta warns. “We can’t know for sure what’s around the corner.”

“ *I* can,” Midoriya points out.

It's that kind of casual confidence that can easily turn cocky if it isn't checked. "Don't put all your faith in informants," Shouta tells him. It's not really the time for a lecture, but it's not *not* the time, either. "Could a ghost lie to you, if it wanted?"

Midoriya frowns. "Why would they? They're dead, what could they possibly gain from—"

The floor pitches beneath them, sending them both airborne.

Shouta manages to land on his feet; Midoriya hits the ground and rolls to a crouch close by. The tunnel shudders and rolls all around them, bowing inward and outward as if heaving for breath. When it finally settles, it's in an entirely different shape than it was before.

"Oh, balls," Midoriya mutters.

Shouta steps closer on instinct, mind racing. This can only be Mimic, meaning he's slipped free of Rock Lock and taken Trigger to enhance his power. If he has enough control to twist the tunnel around them into a new shape, then he definitely has enough to separate them if he wants.

Reports come in over the radio frequency. There are others in the area experiencing the results of Mimic's quirk, and Shouta calls in with one of his own. As far as he can tell, the damage has reached Tunnels 4E, 3W, and 2W. Beyond that, heroes only report noise and rumbling, but no physical change.

"Keep an eye out for Rock Lock," he advises. "His comm is damaged, and as far as I know, he was the last to see Mimic's body."

Acknowledgements crackle over the line; other heroes have heard, and will pass on the message if need be. It's all that he can do, for now.

Ochako lifts her visor just long enough to spit out a mouthful of blood, then rolls out of the way and springs back to her feet.

Katsukame Rikiya is as big as Fatgum if not bigger, hopped up on Trigger and filled to the brim with stolen vitality. He's massive, strong, and way faster than someone his size should be. They can't afford to stay still for a moment.

Well, okay, maybe Ryukyu can, but Ryukyu's twice his size and a dragon, so she doesn't count.

Ochako isn't like Deku. She's not a numbers girl, and she can't tally up stats and pick apart the minutiae of a fight as she's participating in it. But, that being said, she knows they can win this, with that firm certainty she feels when taking a test she's studied for.

Her tongue still throbs and bleeds from where she bit it when Katsukame knocked her into the wall. She thinks her shoulder might be sprained, but she can still use it, for the most part. Tsuyu looks mostly all right even with one eye slowly swelling shut. Nejire is doing better than both of them, because she's been careful not to let Katsukame touch her. Her quirk runs on vitality, and Katsukame's lets him drain it away.

Thanks to the limited space, Ryukyu's size, Katsukame's size, Katsukame's speed, and the constant motion, Nejire hasn't been able to get a clear shot yet. But they're getting there. They just need to pin him down in one spot for a few seconds, and this fight will be over.

An opening appears, and Ochako locks eyes with Tsuyu. Katsukame's rampage has left plenty of rubble for them to work with. In a split second she and Tsuyu are airborne, raining hell down on Katsukame's head. Katsukame tries to dart out of range. A smack from Ryukyu knocks him back into it, but there's only one of her and one of Nejire who's too small to cover the rest, and Katsukame escapes.

Winning this one fight won't solve all their problems, especially when Katsukame is wearing them down in the process. Once Katsukame is down, they have to head deeper and help strengthen the trap. That means more twisty corners, more tight spaces, more risks, more villains. If they go in battered and exhausted, they'll be no help to anyone. This one villain is giving them enough trouble as it is, and they have to assume there will be more of them.

The moment that thought crosses her mind, there's a blur of motion, and a familiar dark figure darts into their midst.

"Oi!" Katsukame roars. "What the hell are you doing here, Twice? I've got this handled!"

Ochako's heart plummets. Twice, of the League of Villains. The one who copies things.

Copies *people* .

"Hey, don't yell at me, I'm just following orders!" Twice whines, before his voice shifts to a guttural roar. "Don't tell me what to do,

you stupid bastard! Especially when you're getting your ass kicked!"

Katsukame snarls and shoves past him, barrelling toward Ryukyu to fight her head-on. Twice charges after him, one hand outstretched. Ryukyu lunges to meet them both in the middle.

There's a flash, and suddenly the chamber gets cramped. Ochako braces herself, reaching out to grip Tsuyu's arm.

And then her mouth drops open, and she hears Nejire squeal in excitement.

A second Ryukyu-dragon stands beside the first, towering over both villains and looking very surprised to be there.

"Oops," Twice says faintly.

"You IDIOT!" Katsukame roars, but Twice is already fleeing into the dark.

"Shouldn't have shoved me!" he yells over his shoulder, and then he's gone.

Katsukame stares up at the two Ryukyus grinning down at him, showing two identical sets of very, very sharp teeth.

"Would you like to surrender?" the original Ryukyu asks. "Or would you rather draw this out further? It's all the same to me."

By some miracle, Kirishima is still on his feet. Actually, it's mostly because he's propped up against Amajiki, but it's still quite a feat given the beating he's taken, by Taishiro's reckoning.

Mentally, he takes stock of things. He's burned through about a third of his reserves of fat, so, not super great, but not terrible, either. Kirishima's been blocking and countering with Unbreakable, but he's running on fumes and Taishiro can see the spiderweb of cracks running through his hardened skin. Amajiki's taken a few hits, so he's not exactly fresh, but Taishiro knows for a fact that he has at least one Chimera Kraken attack in him, and he's waiting for the right moment.

It's the damned barrier, that's the problem. Unlike Kirishima's Unbreakable, the villain whose name Taishiro can't remember seems perfectly able to keep it up as long as he wants, and only drops it so Rappa whatsisname can get in an obnoxious amount of rapid-fire hits

before it goes up again.

Actually no, that's not the only problem. The other problem is that Rappa won't shut up.

"What's the matter with you?" the villain roars, winding up for another flurry of blows. He may be masked, but Taishiro can tell the villain's eyes are fixed on him. "You think I can't tell you three are pulling punches on me? It's like you're not even *trying* to win, cowards."

Taishiro grinds his teeth. They aren't pulling punches. They can't afford to pull punches, because holding back against these two means death. They're just not out to kill anyone, that's all.

But Rappa doesn't seem to see a difference between winning and killing.

And then, as if things can't possibly get any worse, reinforcements arrive—for the villains. Another masked figure, one that Taishiro hasn't seen yet, materializes from the shadows and slips behind the shield.

"The hell are you doing here?" Rappa snarls.

"Don't yell at me, I'm here on Overhaul's orders."

"He knows best," the barrier villain says. "Are you armed?"

"I figured I'd need it," the newcomer replies, pulling a wicked-looking knife.

This only enrages Rappa further, and he chafes against the shield holding him back. "Have you no pride?" he spits—literally spits, Taishiro sees saliva fly from the mask—and punches the barrier in a fit of fury. "There's nothing more tasteless than bringing a knife to a fight. What's the matter, can't win without a weapon?" He tosses his head, winding up his right arm experimentally, as if checking that his quirk still works. "That ain't a real fight. Men're meant to rip each other apart with their own hands. You feel me?"

"Yeah," the newcomer says cheerfully. "I feel you."

And as the heroes watch, they step right up to the barrier villain—*Tengai,* that was the name—and draw the knife blade across his throat.

It's quick, effortless, and downright anticlimactic. Tengai slumps to the ground like a puppet with cut strings, and his barrier flickers and vanishes. The knife falls to the floor with a clatter. The villain previously holding it melts like candle wax, before vanishing with an almost girlish giggle.

Rappa spares the briefest glance for his comrade, then settles into a fighting stance. He's probably grinning behind that mask.

" *Finally* ," he says, in a voice that trembles with joy.

Kirishima gapes at the dead man in blank shock. Taishiro draws him closer, and Amajiki explodes into a blur of hard shells and lashing tentacles.

This is one of the worse-case scenarios Shouta has been dreading. Having the layout of the base memorized is absolutely useless when one of the villains can shape it to his will.

It means he's now relying on Midoriya to lead the way, which was one of the many things he wanted to *avoid* today.

But Midoriya says he knows the way, and second-guessing allies in the field hinders more than it helps. So Shouta follows him, waits when he deliberates, and stamps down on the teacher in him that chafes at being told what to do by a student. They aren't teacher and student here; they're heroes in the field, and seniority doesn't count for much when Midoriya has the quirk advantage.

"Talk to me," he says. "I don't like flying blind. What are we looking at?"

"The tunnels aren't destroyed," Midoriya replies. "They still lead from one place to the next. They're just different. There are more points of intersection, and he added trick hallways that loop back around or lead to dead ends. So the way isn't blocked off, it's just a maze now."

"Fantastic. Are there any—"

Midoriya goes still, one hand out to stop Shouta from going forward, and Shouta bites tongue and listens. There are footsteps coming, and uneven step-shuffle that indicates injury, and before he can ask if it's friend or foe, the newcomer is already upon them.

He sighs with relief. It's Rock Lock, limping and looking rather worse

for where. But he's alive, and that was Shouta's main concern, so he allows himself an increment of relaxation.

"What happened with Mimic?" he asks.

"He got the drop on me," Rock Lock trumbles. "But I know where his body is. The three of us could—"

He doesn't get any further than that before Midoriya punches him in the throat. His student looks to him for a split second, and Shouta hasn't seen him look like that since…

since the end of the provisional license exam.

His capture weapon snaps around Rock Lock's wrists and torso, and a powerful yank sends him crashing to the floor with a startled cry. He lands face-first on the ground, and when he raises his head there's an unsettlingly wide smile on his face, even as his features are melting away.

He takes a step toward Toga, toward Midoriya.

The tunnel shakes, and a wall forms between them, shutting like a camera iris inches from his face. Shouta is left alone in the tunnel, holding half his ruined capture weapon in his hands.

"I *knew* it." Toga's voice, caught somewhere between Rock Lock's and her own, trembles with delight. There's something about the uneven timbre, the razor-sharp smile, the way her tone pitches and vibrates with unrestrained glee, that fills Izuku with visceral, bile-churning horror. "I knew it! You do know me! Don't you, Izu-chan?" Her voice finally settles at its usual high, breathy pitch. She gets smaller as she sheds her disguse, and the remains of Aizawa's capture weapon fall away. Her smile doesn't change, even as her false face sloughs off.

The horror turns to revulsion. The real one is twisted, and not just from her smile. Izuku can see how the line of her nose curves and bends in ways it wasn't meant to, bordered by scars of deep bite wounds that healed poorly. Her skin is rough and patchy with marks left by burns. Izuku can almost recognize the pattern of them.

Both he and Bakugou left their marks on her in Kamino. He can almost taste the blood in his teeth again.

"Watch out," Arai warns. "She's faster than she looks, and she won't

let you grab her." Toga's former victims stand at a distance to keep from hampering Izuku's movement. He appreciates the gesture, and the advice. He's glad that he isn't alone.

"I knew I was right." Toga lashes out in a blur, cutting a harmless slit in the top layer of his costume. He jerks back just in time to keep the damage to the top layer of material. The slice spans the width of Izuku's chest, but doesn't touch skin. "You can't deny it, can you Izu-chan? Can you?" She giggles, high and bright with joy. "No matter what I look like… no matter whose face I'm wearing, you *know* . You always know me! That's never happened before! I've never met anyone like you!"

"Luckily, the feeling's mutual," Izuku says flatly

Toga's next knife swing cuts off a lock of his hair as he ducks away. "I know you haven't. Of course you haven't, it's *fate* . You feel it too, you *have* to."

She flies at him again, and he knocks her back by a roundhouse kick he learned from Iida. He has to shut her out. What she's saying doesn't matter and can't hurt him, especially if he can take her out here.

One of the ghosts passes through the newly-formed wall. "He's still there," she says. "He hasn't left. He's trying to find a way through."

Izuku turns and slams into it with all his might. It's not a sturdy wall; even with one blow, he feels it start to give.

"Behind you!"

Izuku whirls around at the warning and catches the next blow on his shoulder instead of across his back. This one does draw blood, and he's treated to the sight of Toga licking it off the blade like honey off a comb. Another disguise slides into place, and suddenly it's his own face looking back at him, smiling that smile.

"You're mine, Izu-chan," she sing-songs in his voice. "You've always been mine. I don't even have to become you, because we're already the same. You even smile like me, see?"

She smiles, and it's almost the same as his. The only difference is that it's the only smile she has.

Izuku punches it, and doesn't smile back.

“ *Does anyone have eyes on Rock Lock?* ” Eraserhead asks over the radio, and Nighteye shuts his eyes and rocks back and forth slowly. The best.laid plans go awry, but he would have liked them to go awry without killing his colleagues.

Eri sits quietly beside him, clutching a plush toy for comfort. She hasn’t made a sound since all this started, and Nighteye’s not sure if that’s a good thing or not.

“What’s your status, Eraserhead?” he asks.

“ *Mimic took control of the area around Tunnel 4W. I’m close to Deku but cut off; there’s a wall between us, and he’s fighting Toga on the other side.* ”

It’s almost reason to hope, Nighteye thinks. The boy fought her to a standstill once, and it took another villain exploiting his fears to turn the tables. If they’re fighting alone, then Midoriya has a chance.

He says as much to Eraserhead, choosing his words carefully so that Eri won’t overhear.

Midoriya is too far away to touch. Nighteye only hopes he isn’t misjudging his future.

The back of Izuku’s head hits the wall hard, and his vision goes gray and dark. In the literal blink of an eye he’s blind, and reliant on the the ghosts to shout warnings and pull him out of the way of her knife.

But they can’t warn him when the ground pitches beneath him, destroying his steady balance. Toga sees her chance. The world flips and careens, and Izuku’s back hits the ground with punishing force.

Dazed, he loses his grip on One For All, and the voices of the dead fade into the background. The dark spots still cloud his vision, but he can feel her straddling him, knees pressing his ribs tight enough to bruise. Her hand is at his throat, squeezing, and it takes both of his hands just to loosen her grip so he can breathe.

He feels the tip of her knife trace around his face, the outline of the scarring on his eye. “Your scar is so pretty,” she whispers. “Who hurt you, baby? Tell me their name, and I’ll kill them for you. Would you like that? I would. I always kill the things I don’t like.” He struggles, teeth gnashing as he tries to reach the arm holding his throat, and she bounces the back of his head into the floor again. “Or, or… I can make

new ones! Just like the ones you left on me. I was looking at them in the mirror, and I realized… you kissed me, Izu-chan. That was our first kiss." The blade slides toward his nose, stinging without drawing blood. "Can I kiss you too?"

"Get *off of me,* " Izuku chokes out. One For All crackles to life again, and he wrenches her hand away and lashes out with his fist. He's half-blind, but he catches her in the mouth. Her fangs catch on his glove, without piercing it, and he hears something break.

She hits back, and he sees stars. When they fade, his vision starts to clear again. Something drips against his face; her disguise is changing again, and when she speaks, her voice—his voice— starts to shift as well.

"I *like* you," she says. "And you're going to like me too. It'll be easy! I can be anyone you want to be!" Her dark hair pales, and her stolen face drips away. There's a scar underneath. It's not his scar, and it's not hers either.

"How about this?" she asks—with Shouto's voice, with her broken, bloody smile on his face. "Do you like this better?"

Izuku freezes.

"You do! You do like this better. I knew it. I thought so." Her fingers squeeze around his throat again. "That's why I took it. But I only got a little. I'll have to get more. So, so much more."

Izuku's fingers curl around the thumb digging into his pulse point. Dark spots fill his vision again as he grips it and wrenches it back until it snaps.

Toga screams. The knife comes down again. The burst of fiery pain in his shoulder is so distant, it might as well be happening to someone else. His ears ring with Toga's screams as he tears her broken hand from his neck and finally gets one leg between them to kick her away.

Muted explosions draw his attention to the half-crumbled wall. Dust clouds billow out, and the rest of the wall comes tumbling down. Aizawa must have brought charges with him, and now he's free to help, but his capture weapon is cut in half and Toga is well out of range.

The knife is still in her hand. There's a crazed gleam that doesn't belong in Shouto's eyes as she lunges again—

She stops in her tracks, face freezing in its grimace. Small, pale hands clutch the sides of her head, and behind her, a mass of tangled black hair writhes and twists in the dark.

Rei hovers behind her, a pitch-black shadow with two points of pale light for eyes. Toga has a split second of surprise.

And then the screaming starts again.

Izuku presses his hands over his ears, but it's not enough to block out the sound. This isn't pain. Toga screaming when he broke her hand—that was pain.

This is *terror* .

This is what haunts him at night. This is what he faced eight years ago in a closet just two hallways down from his second grade classroom. This is primal fear, encoded into the deepest pits of the human psyche, and Izuku's watching his sister reach down, tear down its barriers, and let it flood.

Toga's eyes meet his for a split second, wild with panic. She turns tail and flees into the dark. Her voice shifts back into her own as it fades away, until only the echoes are left.

Slowly, Rei fades back to normal. It takes even longer for the other ghosts to come back out of hiding.

Technically, Shouta has seen Midoriya look worse. It's not much of a consolation.

He's shaken as he checks his student over and hastily dresses the wound on his shoulder. It's not every day you see a villain halt mid-lunge and run off screaming bloody murder. Especially a villain like Toga Himiko.

"Ghost thing," Midoriya says by way of explanation, and Shouta lets him leave it at that. "Should we keep going?"

"No," Shouta says firmly. "You're very lucky that she missed a major blood vessel, but she still damaged muscle and tendon. I'm taking you back to Nighteye."

Midoriya bridles. "I can still—"

"The answer is no," Shouta says firmly. "Nighteye and I made an

agreement. If you were injured on my watch, I'd take you to wait with him by escape route. I'm not risking your safety for your sense of personal pride."

Midoriya scowls, but follows him. "I'm not a guest here," he points out sullenly. "This isn't the work experience week—you all told me these internships were for real. Am I a hero right now, or just a student?"

"Would you like to become a liability?" Shouta asks, and that shuts him up. "You can continue to relay information from Nighteye's position. You won't be useless."

That seems to satisfy him, for the most part.

"How many are with us?" Shouta asks. He doesn't really need to know, but it's useful to find out, and to keep Midoriya distracted with questions.

"Rei's here," he says. "But she's always here. Narita and Mrs. Kitayama. Couple of police officers, and one of Overhaul's former, uh, coworkers." He wipes a trickle of blood from his face. "There were some others, before. Toga's victims. They followed her when she ran, to keep track of her. They say the League's planning something—plotting against Overhaul."

Also useful information. "Anyone else?"

"Chuuza will probably come around soon," Midoriya says. "She's been making rounds, watching Overhaul's forces for anything or anyone she recognizes."

"Any sign of Overhaul?"

"Not yet," he says. "He's probably hiding as someone else. Shouldn't take them long to find him."

Shouta nods, opens his mouth to reply, and

He can't explain it. He never can, no matter how many times it happens. Call it instinct, experience, or sixth sense—whatever it is, he listens to it every time.

As if in answer to the prickle up his spine, Midoriya's head whips around. "We're being hunted," he says. "Eraserhead—"

The wall tears itself open. Aizawa glimpses masked faces beyond,

more than two but less than ten, charging out to flank them. Shouta's eyes burn as he activates his quirk, and is rewarded when one of the villains trips and falls.

One masked face stands at the forefront of the rest, reaching up to pull back his hood.

Movement. A blur. A projectile? An attack? Shouta has less than no time to tell the difference. Villains are closing in, cutting off their escape, and there's something heading straight for Midoriya.

It's not so much a choice as it is a reflex. Shouta throws himself in front of it, and throws his student past the encroaching villains.

Something pierces his costume and stings against his back. Midoriya looks back at him, and Shouta can see the intent in his eyes.

"Get him out," he says, to people who he can neither hear nor see. "Get him to Nighteye."

His jaw locks, and so does the rest of his body. His muscles won't obey commands from his body.

But his eyes still work, and he can see his student dragged to safety by an unseen force, before the tunnel slams shut again, leaving him alone with his captors.

Izuku struggles and kicks, but it's no use. The tunnel is closed, and Aizawa is beyond his reach; the ghosts are pulling him farther and farther away, and they're past feeling pain.

"Let go!" he yells uselessly. "Let go—I can't just—!"

"You have to," Chuuza barks at him. She's the one who showed up at the last moment, told them they had villains on their tail, but too late, *too late* —

"Midoriya, listen. Listen." Narita's in his face now. "Me and Kitayama —we'll stay with him. If anything goes wrong, we'll raise the alarm and you can have Nighteye send the cavalry."

"They could be killing him *right now* —"

"They won't," Chuuza snaps. "He's valuable to them. Think, a quirk that erases quirks? That's exactly what Overhaul needs for his goals. They won't kill him. He's more valuable to them alive."

The thought of Aizawa in the same place Eri was—imprisoned, tortured, mined for his quirk—makes Izuku sick.

But she's right. Aizawa's life isn't in immediate danger. Rei gives his arm an insistent tug, and he finally stops fighting the ghosts and starts heading deeper into the tunnels, beyond Mimic's reach to where Nighteye hides with Eri.

"I do have good news, though," Chuuza says. "I found Overhaul. He's hidden among his footsoldiers, over in Tunnel 5N. He has a ways to go before he reaches the girl."

Izuku fumbles for his radio and sets it to Nighteye's frequency. He should have alerted Nighteye as soon as things went wrong.

It doesn't take long for Nighteye to reply. " *Status report* ."

"This is Deku," Midoriya says. "Mimic's still in control of the tunnels around 4W. Eraserhead's been captured. I'm heading your way. Should be there in about three minutes."

He hears Nighteye inhale sharply over the line. " *Don't take any risks,* " he says.

Less than a minute later, Togata emerges from the wall. He looks windblown and a little breathless, but Izuku can't see any injuries on him. "Nighteye sent me," Togata says. "He said you were injured."

One of the ghosts snickers. Izuku stares at him, nonplussed. "I didn't tell him I was."

"Yeah, I figured." Togata steps closer, his cape sweeping behind him. It's got a few rips and holes in it; Togata has seen his share of action already.

They reach the rendezvous point in little time. It's an unassuming door among dozens of other unassuming doors; on the other side, they find Nighteye and Eri standing at the entrance to the secret exit.

"I know where Overhaul is," Izuku blurts out as soon as the door is shut behind them. At his approach, Eri, as if drawn by a magnet, moves to latch on to his leg. "He's over in 5N, surrounded by footsoldiers."

Nighteye hesitates. "We're split between suppressing the footsoldiers and taking out the elites," he says. "I just sent Ryukyu's team to track

down Mimic."

"I can go after Overhaul," Togata says.

Nighteye shuts his eyes. "Mirio—"

"It's only logical, isn't it?" Mirio's eyes gleam. "His quirk is touch-based, and he's supposed to be armed with his quirk-canceling bullets. My quirk is the perfect counter to both."

Nighteye purses his lips. "I'm sending Centipeder and Bubble Girl in the same direction," he says.

"They're your backup, aren't they?" Togata says.

"They're the only ones who can be spared, and I don't want anyone challenging Overhaul alone." He levels a stern look at Togata. "You will not engage with Overhaul before you rendezvous with them, do you understand?"

"Yes, Sir."

Nighteye nods. "Go. And be careful."

Togata throws a salute that's almost cheeky, ruffles Eri's hair, and vanishes through the door with a flick of his cape.

"How's your shoulder?" Nighteye asks.

Izuku glances at it. "Fine," he says, and Rei hisses at the fib. "I mean, it's about as good as you'd expect—"

It hits him all at once. He's been suppressing it so long and so easily that he barely realized he was doing it at all.

Aizawa's capture. The influx of ghosts that came with the villains. Toga. *Toga fucking Himiko* .

There are hands on his shoulders, steadying him. A second set of hands grips his pant leg.

"I'm fine," he hears himself way. "I'm—it's just—"

"You are not fine," Nighteye tells him. "You're not supposed to be fine. You're supposed to be on edge, upset, and afraid."

"Oh," Izuku says absently. "That's good, then. Because I am… all of

those things."

"I'd be concerned if you weren't." Once he's sure that Izuku won't fall over, Nighteye releases him.

"Can we get Eri out yet?" Izuku asks.

"Not as long as Overhaul is free and his forces are watching the surrounding area," Nighteye says. "Once he's captured, and his men know he's captured, then it will be safe."

"I don't mind hiding longer," Eri says.

"You've been very brave," Nighteye tells her. "But don't worry. It won't be long now."

"It won't be long at all," Chuuza echoes.

Suddenly, Rei jerks upright. She whips around so quickly that Izuku jumps, but before he can ask her what's wrong, she goes for Chuuza's throat.

"Rei!" Izuku steps toward her, confused and alarmed, as Chuuza vanishes and reappears out of her reach. "What's—"

"Hey!"

Izuku doesn't know the new voice, doesn't see who it is until more ghosts appear in the room, one after another, the faces of civilians and police officers and criminals alike.

The speaker is one of the criminals, who's staring around the room in wide-eyed confusion and alarm.

"What the hell are you still doing here?" he demands."Chuuza, you were supposed to warn them!"

"Midoriya?" Nighteye says.

"We need to go," Izuku says, and turns toward the escape route. "Now. Something's wrong."

The words are barely past his lips when the entrance peels back with a deafening shriek of metal, and the surrounding walls are ripped away like cardboard.

Izuku goes for Eri on instinct, shielding her from flying debris. He half

expects the ceiling to come crashing down on top of them, but instead, it opens up as well.

When Izuku opens his eyes, he's crouching in a cavern torn into the tunnels, leaving jagged edges and rubble strewn throughout the space. Their escape route is gone.

There are ghosts everywhere. And they aren't alone.

There are only three men standing where there once was a concrete wall and a reinforced door. This wouldn't be nearly as much of a problem if it weren't for the fact that one of them is Overhaul.

He's dressed very much like himself and not at all like a footsoldier, and he is nowhere near Tunnel 5N. Slowly, as the ice creeps through his veins, Izuku turns to Chuuza.

She gives him a pitying look. "Don't look at me like that," she says. "I did tell you, before. All I've ever wanted was to make things right."

"Chuuza, you fucking turncoat," one of the ghosts snarls.

Her face twists with fury. "How dare you," she spits back. "How dare you call me a traitor when you would turn on the young master so easily—"

"He **killed** us!" the ghost roars. "He killed **you!**"

"Because we failed him, you coward!" Chuuza's grimace shifts into a smile that borders on ecstasy. "I failed him, but this… this is my chance at redemption. And it could have been yours, if only you had reached out and taken it instead of abandoning the one you owe your life and loyalty to."

"I don't have a life anymore," one of the others says. "I don't owe him a damn thing."

"What did you think was gonna happen, Chuuza?" says another. "Did you really think you'd get away with all this?"

"It will be worth it," Chuuza says. "What happens to me doesn't matter. I don't matter. It'll all be worth it."

Out of the corner of his eye, Izuku sees Nighteye reach for his comm and grasp at nothing. He feels for his own, but the earpiece is gone.

One of the men flanking Overhaul holds up both devices between the

fingers one hand. “Can’t let you do that,” he says, before dropping them and crushing them under his heel.

Setsuno Toya. Quirk: Larceny. Allows him to instantly transport an object into his hand.

“For all the good that will do you,” Nighteye says flatly. “I already… sent away the nearest reinforcements.”

Izuku glances at him, wondering what his play is, but Nighteye looks just as confused to have said that as Izuku is to hear it.

“Trying to scare us off with lies?” the third asks. “It won’t work. Especially since Overhaul sealed off the area. No one gets in or out until he decides it.” He tilts his masked head to the side. “Come now, how do you really feel?”

Nighteye grinds his teeth for a moment, then replies, “Outnumbered.” It looks almost physically painful to say.

Nemoto Shin. Quirk: Confession. Forces you to speak the truth.

“Eri,” Overhaul says. “You can fix this, you know.”

Eri flinches and grips Izuku’s leg harder.

“Come now,” Overhaul continues. “You must have known this would happen eventually. It’s in your nature to bring suffering to those around you.”

“Hey, shut up,” Izuku snaps.

Overhaul ignores him. “They’re going to die because of you, Eri. The only way to save them is to come back.”

“I said shut up!” Izuku shouts back. “Now who’s trying to scare us off with lies?” He presses his hand to Eri’s shoulder, just in case she starts to believe what she’s hearing.

“Do you really think you can win?” Nemoto asks. “The two of you, alone against us? Against Overhaul? Do you really think you can come out of this alive?”

He feels the pull of the villain’s quirk, as if something grips his tongue and forces it to move.

“ *I don’t know,* ” his mouth says for him.

“What do you think is going to happen, if you continue to stand against us?” Nemoto’s quirk presses against Izuku’s throat. “Are you afraid, boy?”

“Yes,” comes out of his mouth before it even reaches his brain.

Eri trembles against him. Izuku looks down and finds her crying without a sound.

The room is so crowded, and so quiet, and so very, very cold. Izuku is, too.

“I’m scared,” he says, and this is still an answer, so the quirk won’t let him lie. “I’m so, so scared of what I’m going to have to do to you.”

When he looks up, all eyes are on him. Overhaul glances briefly at Nemoto, then back to him.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Nemoto demands.

His tongue moves on its own again. He can’t stop it from moving, but he can control the shapes it forms. The quirk demands truth, and Izuku has so much truth to offer.

“You can still leave now,” he says. “You don’t have to die here. I don’t want you to have to die. I get so little sleep as it is.”

There are so many ghosts in this room, and so many beyond. If Overhaul joins them, then he’s going to have to watch what they do to him.

“Believe me,” he says, and his voice trembles as he holds back a hysterical laugh. “You—you really don’t want to die here. You don’t.”

Overhaul sighs, shaking his head. “Technical truths. Aren’t you a clever one? That’s your trouble, you now. From the beginning, you’ve been far too clever for your own good.”

“I’m getting real tired of villains saying nice things about me,” Izuku answers.

“Watch what you say!” Nemoto snaps. “Overhaul is no villain. The Shie Hassaikai are proud yakuza!”

Overhaul lifts his hand. “Such a shame this will be over quickly,” he says. “I’m going to enjoy watching you suffer.”

That triggers a memory that he wishes he didn't have, and this time Izuku does laugh. Part of him wonders what that must look like. "It's funny, you know," he says. "You're so proud of how much better you all are than villains. But you know what? You just said the same thing All For One said before he died. At least he knew he was a worm."

"Do you really think you can win this?" Nemoto asked. "You're outmatched." His quirk demands another truth, and Izuku gives it.

"They tore him apart, you know," he says to Overhaul. "I'm going to watch them do the same to you."

Nighteye's hand closes on his shoulder, his grip firm and steady. Izuku feels his panic in the distance, and shelves it for later.

They're on their own.

Chapter End Notes

> CW: one-sided romantic obsession, shapeshifting/imposter, blood and injury, strangling, nonconsensual touching, broken bones, forced truth telling.

Chapter 58

Chapter Notes

holy mother of god

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eventually Shouta comes to realize that he is not, in fact, paralyzed.

That was his first thought when he felt the villain's quirk take hold. It was an easy mistake to make; there he was with his body suspended in invisible concrete, helpless to resist as Overhaul's men surrounded him and took him prisoner. But eventually, it occurs to him that he can still move, and his body is still responding to commands from his brain. It's just doing it very, very slowly. His eyelids slide at a snail's pace when he blinks, and when he tries to struggle, he may as well be swimming through actual, liquid concrete. Luckily it seems to affect voluntary actions only; he's still breathing fairly normally, so he's not about to suffocate, and when his hand finally reaches the side of his throat, he finds his pulse rate normal as well.

This also answers his most pressing question: the villain holding him prisoner has to be Kurono Hari, one of Overhaul's closest lieutenants.

At the moment, Shouta lies in a small chamber molded from the tunnels by Mimic's quirk, immobilized with Kurono and a few henchmen standing guard over him. Kurono took his knife, and someone tied a blindfold over Shouta's eyes to keep him from using his quirk. Someone else kicked him in the ribs and stamped down hard on his right leg. It's hard to judge the pain when he can hardly move, but they're most likely broken. Luckily, the villain quickly bores of kicking someone incapable of even reacting, much less fighting back, and none of the others pick up where he left off.

They're waiting, he realizes. They have to wait. Mimic can only control so much of the tunnels, and the Trigger that allows him to do so will only last so long. There's only one exit to their hiding place, and beyond it, their way out is still swarming with heroes. They have to wait for their boss to clear the way for them.

Kurono is saying something to him, but Shouta checked out a few minutes ago. It's not anything useful; the young man is simply ranting about his leader's motives. You hear one grandiose speech about

destroying the world to build it anew, and you've heard them all.

And so, Shouta lies still and waits, because there's literally nothing else he can do besides bide his time until opportunity or rescue arrives. He wonders idly if there are any ghosts in the room with them.

He hopes they know not to bother with him. They're far more help to Midoriya than they are to him.

"Hey." The ghost that speaks to him is one of Overhaul's former followers, the one that called Chuuza a turncoat. Chuuza herself is nowhere to be seen; either they tore her apart or she fled. "You can help us fight, can't you? You can make it so he sees us, and feels us." His eyes glitter eagerly. "Do it. Bring us all in, and we'll beat him to a pulp for you."

The ones in hearing range echo the speaker.

"Do it!"

"What're you just standing there for?"

"I've waited long enough! I want to make him *hurt!*"

Nemoto Shin is the first to charge, navigating the treacherous ground before Chisaki has released it from his quirk. He's nimble and quick enough to manage it, and Izuku holds himself balanced and ready because Nemoto's path is heading straight for him.

His fingers spark. All around him, the voices of the dead rise and fall. Many of them are still focused on Chuuza, but they're there. He could make them solid, *real*. He could bring out a small army against Nemoto, against Larceny and Overhaul. They want to fight; they've made that much clear ever since Izuku brought them into this.

But.

Chuuza is still fresh in his mind. The last he saw of her, she was spitting curses and lashing at the angry dead around her. With Chuuza gone, the spectral crowd stirs, and Izuku hesitates. The power reaches his fingertips and goes no further.

What if she isn't the only one?

His hesitation almost costs him. Izuku blinks and Nemoto is close—he

can dodge, but he's between him and Eri—can he grab her first? Does he have time—?

A gray blur blocks his vision, and Izuku stumbles back as Nighteye meets Nemoto head-on. In the blink of an eye, the masked man is hurtling into the nearest wall. He's a lot less graceful in landing than Izuku remembers being.

"Focus." Nighteye's sharp voice brings him back to the present. "They'll try to separate us. Keep hold of her—as soon as there's an opening, you *get out*. Do you understand?"

Izuku lifts Eri onto his back. She settles there, arms locked around his shoulders, and doesn't make a sound. "I understand," he says.

Overhaul's hands touch down once more, and the ground shreds itself to pieces. Spikes and shrapnel hurtle straight at them. Izuku dodges the worst of it, but feels the sting as tiny shards of concrete hurtle at his face. Eri's arms tighten around him, and he drops her face into his shoulder, which tells him that she got stung, too.

"Sorry," he whispers to her. "Are you okay, Eri?"

"*Mm-hm.*" It comes out as a whimper.

Another barrage of debris flew at them. "Hold on!" Izuku launched himself into the air, rebounding off the nearest wall to stay clear and slow his descent. Voices reached his ears from all around, ghosts calling out warnings to cover the angles he can't see himself. The geography changes again and again, spikes and valleys and hidden pits, but Izuku manages to keep up with each attack.

But that's all he can do, keep up. He can't win like this. He can't even escape, not with Eri on his back. Chisaki closed all the exits, Izuku can't break open a new one without exposing himself and Eri to attack. They're still trapped, and with their line of communication gone, they have no way of knowing whether help is coming.

Another voice reaches him from the wall: Nemoto is on his feet, his mocking tone ringing out over the voices of the dead. "So you're all talk after all," he taunts. "How did you cheat my quirk?"

"I told the truth," is ripped from Izuku's throat. "Believe me, that's a first for me, too."

Nemoto shakes his head, as if giving up on him, and turns his

attention on Nighteye instead. Izuku can only spare them a brief glance and trust that Nighteye has it handled.

“I am getting tired of this,” Chisaki says dryly. He’s barely moved in the past few minutes. “Larceny.”

Instinctively, Izuku latches on to Eri’s arms. He isn’t sure if Larceny’s quirk works on living things as well as inanimate objects, but right now Eri is the most precious thing he’s holding, and if the yakuzas get their hands on her then all is lost.

But Larceny doesn’t activate his quirk, and Eri never leaves his back. Instead, Chisaki rips up the ground yet again, forcing Izuku on the defensive. Spikes and explosions burst from the ground and narrowly miss tearing into his face. It’s worse than anything Bakugou has ever thrown at him, worse than Pixie-bob at her most ruthless; it’s a hurricane of shrapnel that obscures his vision, forcing him down to base instinct just to stay on his feet and keep from being bludgeoned to death by flying rubble, or skewered on the tip of a spike. He can’t see Nighteye anymore, can’t hear him if the hero tries to call out to him. Even the ghosts feel beyond reach; the only one quick enough to stay close is Rei. With a burst of One For All he flings himself backward, wincing when shrapnel still grazes him. His ears ring with the tearing of concrete and his own pounding pulse.

When he can hear again, the ghosts are screaming at him.

“***Watch out!***”

He raises his head, and meets Larceny’s crazed smile as he stares down the barrel of a handgun.

His immediate thought is to shield Eri. The instinct to dodge comes too late.

A point on his shoulder stings, and One For All’s lightning sputters into sparks. Panic shoots through Izuku, flooding his senses with a choking feeling of dread. Rei is screaming, nearly drowning out the nearest ghosts when they warn him.

“*Quirk-erasing bullets—*”

His body moves on its own, driven by instinct and desperation. He can almost feel it spreading through his veins, burning out the fire and lightning inside him and leaving him cold and empty. He reaches for One For All’s vanishing embers, stokes the fire but it can vanish

completely—

and pours it all into the nearest ghost he can touch.

Rei's black eyes meet his for a split second, blank with shock, before the green lightning fills her.

And then Izuku can't feel it anymore. The familiar hum of his inherited quirk, always floating just within reach whenever he needs it, is gone. Numb silence roots him to the spot where he stands.

Across the room, Larceny laughs wildly as he turns the gun toward Nighteye. Izuku is watching his face, and sees the moment his triumphant smile vanishes.

A writhing mass of darkness hits him and keeps going, hurling him across the demolished ground until their momentum finally runs out. Larceny lands flat on his back, and the wriggling dark shifts, contorts and settles into the Rei's shape. She's crouching over him, strings of black leading from the tips of her claw-like fingers to Larceny's eyes. Her dark hair twists into living shadows.

Inches away from his face, Rei opens her mouth wide enough to split her head in half, and *screams*.

Larceny's mouth opens wide, but he doesn't scream. He probably can't. It takes some time before he finally, mercifully falls unconscious.

Chisaki lunges, but before he can try to touch Rei, she vanishes. Izuku blinks, and finds her standing near him again, green sparks running across her body. The other ghosts are silent, staring at her in shock—but they're *there*.

One For All is gone, but he still—

One For All is *gone*—

"It's not gone," a familiar voice says, startling him. It's Magne—Magne from the League of Villains is here, watching the fight instead of following her former comrades. "I've been watching 'em. You just got hit with one of their temporary bullets. Survive this, and it'll come back. Eventually."

Izuku looks to her, raw with hope. After Chuuza, he isn't sure if he can trust another villain ghost so soon. And this is Magne, a member of

the League, who has only ever hurt him and hurt his classmates and teachers. She hurt Pixie-bob. She helped kidnap him and Bakugou. She's part of the reason why Ragdoll lost her quirk.

The dead villain sneers a little. "What's that look for?" she asks. "I'm no sycophant like that bitch from before. You know damn well where my loyalties lie. He killed me, and I want him destroyed, simple as that."

"She's right," another ghost adds. "They only just developed the permanent bullets, and with the girl gone they couldn't make more. They won't waste the few they have arming an Expendable. If anyone's got them it's Chisaki himself."

"At least Nemoto's down," someone else says.

Izuku looks around, trying to pinpoint where he last saw Nemoto, and jumps when Nighteye seems to materialize next to him. There's blood on the hems of his sleeves.

"Where's Nemoto?" Izuku asks.

"Taken care of," Nighteye replies grimly. "Your quirk—"

"It's temporary," Izuku says. "I think. Only—" He hesitates, because Chisaki may still be in earshot. "Only the strength is gone." He feels sick to his stomach, admitting that to the man who didn't want him to inherit it in the first place.

If Nighteye has anything to say about it, a low growl from Rei stops him short. He looks straight at her, seeing her. She's *there*, visible and solid and real. She looks back at him, considering. A tendril of black hair slithers free from the rest and curls up toward Nighteye. He eyes it cautiously, until he sees that the end of it is wrapped around Larceny's handgun.

"My patience is wearing thin." Chisaki's voice, muffled as it is by the mask, still reaches them easily. "Give me the girl."

"Are you really in a position to be making demands?" Nighteye asks. It's two against one, now. Three, if they count Rei. The look on Rei's face tells Izuku that she very much counts herself.

"Consider this," Chisaki says mildly. "Having her with you does not guarantee your safety. If I have to tear you both apart, and her along with you, then I will. I have a lot of practice putting her back

together."

Izuku opens his mouth to tell him where he can stick his demands. Rei unhinges her jaw and cuts him off with a rattling shriek that reverberates in the marrow of his bones. To Chisaki's credit, he only hesitates a little before he lunges forward to turn the room against them once more.

A quirk-nullifying dart hits him right in the throat. His hands hit the ground, and nothing happens. Nighteye lowers the gun with a satisfied huff.

With an eerie calm, Chisaki pulls the dart out and tosses it aside. "I'm sure you think you're very clever, but the bullets in that gun are quite temporary. The permanent serum is in very short supply; I cannot trust just anyone with it, even among my own men."

"You're still out a quirk," Izuku retorts. "How long do you think you can last without it?" Nighteye reaches out as if to hold him back.

"The purpose of my quirk is to destroy and rebuild," Chisaki replies with a disinterested shrug. "It is, by its very nature, resistant to the temporary serum. It will be back shortly. How shortly? Well, you have no way of knowing that, I'm afraid."

"It's two minutes," a ghost says helpfully. "You have two minutes."

"Two minutes, good to know," Izuku says aloud, and the pregnant pause on Chisaki's end settles his nerves with satisfaction.

Chisaki considers him for a while. "I might take you along, when I retrieve that," he says, nodding toward Eri. "Something tells me I could learn a lot by studying you."

Rei lunges forward with a snarl, but Izuku stops her. She turns to him with a dark scowl, skull flashing behind her face.

"You should stay back," Nighteye tells him. "I can handle him without his quirk."

It's a lie. Chisaki without his quirk is still formidable, and there's no way of knowing whether Nighteye can take him down before the serum wears off. Two of them together might have a better chance, but…

One For All is gone. Izuku can feel that it's gone. He is strong enough

from training, but the loss is clear. With One For All he had barely felt Eri's weight on his back, but now, especially with his wound from Toga…

"Rei," he says. "I have a job for you." Her scowl turns to a gentler frown, and then wide-eyed understanding when Izuku carefully lowers Eri to the ground. "Eri, this is Rei. She's my sister."

Eri is silent, staring at Rei with eyes as round as saucers. She steps forward at Izuku's encouraging nudge, and Rei's writhing shadows move to surround her protectively.

"Stay together," Izuku says to both of them. "Rei, if anything happens, get her out. And if you run out of… of strength… come back and tell me." He smiles bleakly. "Hopefully this won't take that long."

Rei nods, takes Eri's hand, and pulls her closer. Eri stares at her, then back at Izuku.

"I'll be right back," he tells her with another smile. "Don't worry, okay? This will all be over soon."

Does it count as lying if he doesn't know the truth?

The path to Tunnel 5N is a winding, circuitous maze that requires either a map or a very good memory. Thanks to the mess that Mimic left, it's even worse. In the area that he took control of, all rhyme and reason to the layout is gone, replaced with a hopeless snarl of tunnels and chambers.

Luckily, Mirio has never had to bother with all of that. When he's in costume, every path is a straight path.

A quick detour takes him to 4W, and he quite literally pokes his head into a chamber to find Ryukyu and her interns battling with the architecture. Uraraka launches Hadou into the air, Asui scales the shifting walls to catch her in her tongue and fling her into position, and finally an airborne Hadou unleashes a spiral blast into a bulge in the wall. The wall bursts open, and the body of Overhaul's henchman Mimic tumbles free. Ryukyu shifts smoothly from human to dragon form to snatch him up, only for the wall to bulge outward and catch him instead.

They seem to have things handled. Mirio leaves them to it, and continues on his way to find Overhaul in 5N. The further he gets from

Mimic, the less twisted the tunnels become, until he's finally running straight down one, absolutely certain of the way to his destination.

So far he hasn't gotten word that Overhaul's location has changed, and his hopes are high. Underneath, the instinctual fear of facing Overhaul swims in his gut. For all his confidence, he doesn't relish the thought of fighting him alone. Obviously he'll do it if it means Eri never has to hurt again. He wasn't lying when he said he was best equipped for Overhaul's most formidable weapons. But it doesn't make him any less nervous.

There's something to be said about fear, though.

It keeps his senses sharp.

He turns his torso intangible because that's what his body tells him to do, and the knife passes harmlessly through his lower stomach. Without his quirk, the blade would have gutted him.

A second attack comes in the form of a stab to his neck, but by now he's spread his quirk to the entire upper half of his body. In a smooth, well-practiced move, he lets his arm turn solid again, grabs his attacker's wrist, and twists. The knife drops, only for another to appear in their other hand. A third knife-swing passes through his chest, and he releases them and drops back for room to breathe.

Toga Himiko stands across from him, barefoot and grinning so wide that her gums are showing. Her clothes are bloody and several sizes too large, as if she stole them off of a body. Mirio would rather not speculate.

The villain looks down at the knife in her hand, its blade dry, and her smile fades to a pout. "You have the worst quirk *ever*," she whines at him.

Mirio smiles brightly. "Sorry to disappoint."

Her eyes glitter in what little light the tunnel offers. "That's okay," she says. "I just have to try harder. Don't I, Togata-*senpaiiii?*" She draws the sound out into a singsong lilt.

Mirio's eyes narrow. He knows why she knows his name; she heard it from Midoriya back when she and Compress tried to take Eri before. There's still something deeply uncomfortable about hearing her say it like that.

“Can you still bleed, senpai?” she asks, and her high-pitched cutesy tone could not sound more wrong coming from a girl with blood around her mouth and a knife in her hand. “Or if I cut you open, is there just air inside?”

Mirio weighs his options. He still has to get to Overhaul, before he moves on and they lose track of him again. But Toga Himiko is still *dangerous*, and the way she uses her quirk makes her even more so. There’s a murderous yakuza leader in Tunnel 5N, but that doesn’t change the fact that there’s a serial killer standing right in front of him, and some of the blood on her knives belongs to Midoriya.

He can make this quick.

One hundred, one hundred and one, one hundred and two…

That’s close enough for Nighteye’s liking. “Less than twenty seconds,” he calls to Midoriya. “Start moving away.” Midoriya, infuriatingly, keeps attacking for a handful of seconds. He aims for soft spots, painful spots, and Nighteye doesn’t need years of experience to see the fury building within Chisaki’s every move. “Midoriya, *now!*”

The boy seems to ignore him as the seconds run out. Nighteye’s heart is in his throat by the time he finally twists around behind Chisaki and drives a punishing blow into his lower back. Had he been using One For All, even at his low percentage, a hit like that would have destroyed the villain’s kidney. It actually paralyzes Chisaki for all of two seconds, and Midoriya uses that to finally, finally get clear.

—nineteen, one hundred and twenty!

Nighteye fires again, and it hits. Chisaki manages to mold the ground beneath Nighteye into spikes before the serum takes hold again. Nighteye avoids the worst of it, but one of the spikes tears through his suit and gouges into his side. A flesh wound, but still a liability in a fight. For a moment, Chisaki’s wild eyes lock with his. Even from the distance, Nighteye can hear his breath hissing in his mask, betraying his rage.

As soon as it’s safe again, Midoriya continues his attack. He hasn’t let up for a second, even though he has to be exhausted. Nighteye can see how much the boy has been holding back until this fight, because without One For all, he is *vicious*.

Tucking the handgun away, Nighteye ducks under a protruding spike

and rushes to join them.

The fight reeks of desperation, and Nighteye can't be sure that any of it is Chisaki's. The villain is outnumbered and quirkless, but they are effectively quirkless as well. Midoriya still has his ghosts, and Nighteye can tell by the way he moves that he's getting boosts here and there from them.

...thirty-four, thirty-five, thirty-six…

Midoriya launches himself off of a ridge and drives a kick into Chisaki's chest, throwing him backward with a grunt of pain. The villain twists, narrowly avoiding a cluster of spikes left by his own quirk, when he could last use it.

Forty-one, forty-two, forty-three-forty-four…

Seeing his intern get that close to Chisaki still drives Nighteye's heart rate up, even as he moves in to get close himself. It's to his chagrin that he finds himself mimicking Midoriya's strategy. He aims for soft spots, pressure points, places he knows it will hurt. He aims for joints. He aims for organs. He aims low.

Only rookies and blowhards worry about looking classy when they fight. The heroes that stay alive are the ones that know that there's no such thing as a pretty fistfight. Whoever hits first and hits hardest has the best chance of winning.

The minutes run down in Nighteye's head, but Chisaki refuses to let up. It's a desperate fight on all sides, with Chisaki fighting to escape while Nighteye and Midoriya fight to stop him. They can't bring him down in this round either.

One-ten, one-eleven, one-thirteen—

"Get clear!" he shouts. "*Now!*" Midoriya is already backing off as the words leave his mouth, weaving and climbing through the spikes and ridges. Chisaki pursues him, more used to navigating the effects of his own quirk than the boy is. As Midoriya moves away, Nighteye fights his way closer.

The seconds run out. Nighteye aims and fires. The first shot misses, and he curses the wasted bullet. Chisaki moves closer, one hand deep in his pocket. His free hand touches a spike, and the ground ripples and molds itself like living clay. All at once, Nighteye is on the defensive as the ground turns against him. Another spike tears

through his leg, and his vision goes gray with pain when he puts his weight on it. There's a shout as Midoriya tries to reach him, but another lethal wave from Chisaki's quirk stops him from getting close.

"Go to Eri!" It's an order, but Midoriya still hesitates. "Go to Eri, now!"

"He's not going anywhere," Chisaki informs him, and Nighteye realizes that the spikes around the boy have formed a cage.

Facing the villain alone, Nighteye wrestles with his fears. If they lose the child, then all of this is for nothing. If he can't handle this, then what chance does the child have? She has a ghost with her, but how long will that last when Midoriya has no more One For All to give?

As if in answer to his own thoughts, the ghost child Rei lets out an unearthly scream that reverberates through every inch of the cavern.

The scream makes Chisaki pause, giving Nighteye a split second of opportunity. He fires off two more shots, and to his surprise and relief they actually hit, one in the throat and the other right between the eyes. Nighteye lets out the breath he was holding. They have time again. Maybe more than two minutes, if two bullets hit him at once.

Chisaki halts, breath hissing in a deep sigh. He sounds tired—not weary, but irritated. His hand comes out of his pocket holding a syringe.

Nighteye lunges forward, but it's useless and he knows it. There's too much distance between them, too many obstacles, too much breathing room on Chisaki's end to stop him from inserting the needle into his own arm.

For a moment there's nothing. And then, his body ripples.

Nighteye's heart turns to a leaden pit in his chest. Two bullets and Chisaki's quirk is still working, which can only mean that he just injected himself with—

"That's the first rule of creating a powerful weapon," Chisaki says serenely. Before their eyes, his face deconstructs and reconstructs itself. The bullets fall to the ground with a clatter. "Have contingencies in case it is used against you. It's a little tasteless, using Trigger. I'll freely admit that. But *oh*, does it make me strong."

Chisaki doesn't run through the severe terrain. He doesn't weave

through the spikes, doesn't dodge around the obstacles he made with his own hands.

He *flows* through it.

His body splits into tributaries of flesh, sloughing like a viscous liquid through the gaps in the terrain and reforming on the other side, for no other apparent purpose than to travel in a straight line. Just looking at it makes the bile rise in Nighteye's throat.

"This has been very interesting," Chisaki says. "Goodbye."

He doesn't move, doesn't bend down to touch the ground, doesn't move his hands from his sides. A spike bursts from the ground on its own with a shriek of tearing concrete, and then the room is silent again.

Nighteye blinks, and the pain he registers is so intense that he can't even make a sound. It's the sort of pain that ought to make him fall to the ground, but—very strange, he can't fall either. Why is he still standing when he hurts that much?

He looks down.

Oh, that's why.

His ears ring as Chisaki approaches him and puts a hand to his forehead. He should struggle, but he can't move. He can't even fall down, propped up as he is by the spike impaling him through the stomach.

"It hurts, doesn't it? I could stop the pain, you know. I could end it right now. But I won't—my mercy must be earned, and you haven't, I'm afraid."

Nighteye shuts his eyes as if waiting for death. In the darkness of his closed eyelids, he looks into Chisaki's future. His heart sinks low in his bloodstained chest, and does not rise again.

Of course. Of course it would be that way. He was a fool to ever think otherwise.

Chisaki walks away without killing him. Nighteye opens his tired eyes and resigns himself to watching the future play out a second time.

With every blow that misses, every swing of her knife that permeates

his body harmlessly, the bloodlust in Toga Himiko's eyes mounts. Mirio can almost see foam flecking at her lips as she pulls them back in a grin that stretches from one side of her face to the other.

Mirio drops into the floor, shoots back out, and misses her again. It's not that she's predicting where he'll strike; she just won't stop *moving*. When he's underground, he's blind, deaf, and suffocating. He only has intuition and past experience to suggest to him where she might move.

But Toga Himiko seems to delight in defying expectations, and so every time Mirio bursts from beneath the ground to aim a blow at her, he finds her well out of reach.

This cycle happens about four times before Mirio switches tactics. She's using the same strategy Midoriya did, that time in the UA gym. It takes less energy for her to dodge than it does for Mirio to repeatedly use his quirk, so as long as she keeps moving and predicting him, she can gradually wear him down.

So Mirio pops up topside one last time, and attacks her head on.

He keeps one eye on the blade in her hand and one eye on the rest of her, so that he knows what parts of his body to turn permeable. He has to split his brain to do so, between dodging, countering, striking, and activating his quirk. One of the best skills he ever learned from Sir was how to multitask.

Gradually, Toga's movements grow more and more erratic. She's getting angry, losing her hold on her temper, and that means she's one step closer to losing. An angry combatant is a careless one.

With a scream of effort she swings her knife one last time, and instead of dodging or phasing through it, Mirio drops one last time, activating and releasing his quirk almost immediately. This skill of his has been compared to teleporting and warping before, and for a good reason; in the blink of an eye he's behind her and sending a punishing blow into her lower back.

Toga goes down choking on pain, and Mirio closes in.

She still fights madly, clawing and snapping with her knife and her bare hands, and it's a trial to stay solid enough to hold her while still phasing through her attacks.

"Stop—*stop,*" he urges her, trying to wrest the knife from her hands.

“It’s over! You have to know it’s over.”

Her breath hisses in and out. She bares her teeth to the gums like a cornered dog, twisting and lashing out at any piece of him she can reach. He pins her roughly, hoping to slow her down by knocking the wind out of her. It works halfway; she gasps for breath but won’t stop fighting him. He twists her wrist until the knife falls from her hand, and she screams more with fury than with pain.

“It’s *over*,” he tells her through gritted teeth. She tries to bite him, but her teeth close on nothing. She tries to kick him, and her foot passes through him harmlessly. He pins her down, arm twisted so she can’t use it against him, and she pulls out another knife with the other arm and swings it toward his face. He makes his whole head intangible to avoid it, and goes blind and deaf for a split second. He’s tired of this. He wants this to be over. He’s not even supposed to be fighting Toga; she’s already held him up long enough that Chisaki’s probably left Tunnel 5N by now. He’s worried about the other heroes, about Sir and Midoriya and Tamaki and Hadou and the younger interns. He’s worried about Eri.

He releases his quirk with a gasp as he breathes through his nose and mouth again. Hearing and vision come back, and he looks down at the villain he has pinned to the concrete floor.

Midoriya stares up at him, eyes bright with fear and pain.

“Togata-senpai? You’re hurting me.”

It’s not rational, not in the least. He knows what Toga’s power is, and he knows it’s her, but Midoriya’s cracked, pained voice makes him freeze on instinct. The key to skill is experience, and Mirio has never had a friend's face used against him like this before.

His hesitation lasts only for a split second, but by the time it passes, there’s already a knife beneath his ribs.

He punches her in the jaw before she can twist or pull it out. Her eyes roll up in her head, and she goes limp. As Mirio gingerly rises to his feet, Midoriya’s face starts to melt off. In seconds, he’s left with a naked and unconscious Toga.

Mirio hesitates. He’s loathe to just leave her here, where she might wake up and continue making trouble. But he doesn’t have a radio on him, and he has to go. Even if it’s harder to fight while injured, he has to at least check to see if Overhaul is where he’s supposed to be.

In the end, he tears a strip from his cape and binds Toga's hands behind her back. Her knives are gone; one is on the ground, and the other is in his body. If she had any more, then they've disappeared along with her clothes.

He retrieves the dropped knife and carries on.

The room heaves again, threatening to swallow him whole. Izuku takes a desperate flying leap off of the ridge he's perched on. With One For All he could clear the immediate danger easily, but without it, the strength in his body just isn't enough. He throws a hand out, and several ghosts grab him and pull. Others boost him from behind, and the ghosts around him heave and drag him to safety. He scrambles over the pit as it surges up and closes beneath him, inches away from catching him like a giant, jagged mouth. Izuku tumbles to relative safety and keeps moving.

This isn't a fight anymore. He can't touch Chisaki, can't approach him, can't slow him down. He can't even get close enough to see if he has another quirk-suppression weapon. His hands and face are scraped and bleeding, his costume torn, his body bruised and aching, and that's just from fighting the environment. He hasn't gotten close to Chisaki since before—

Before—

Izuku races through the forest of concrete spikes as the ground trembles and pitches again. It throws him off his feet; he cracks his knees on the ground, stumbles upright, and keeps running. The ground bounces him again, and he rolls to a stop at the edge of a blood spatter. Izuku lifts his eyes to see Nighteye watching him, still held upright on the spike that punched clear through him.

His heart plummets when he sees the hero's face. He's seen enough ghosts to know what despair looks like. Many of them are gathered around Nighteye right now, clustered together as if waiting for one more of Chisaki's victims to join them.

As Izuku picks himself up, he looks beyond Nighteye to find Rei with her arms around Eri, holding her close and surrounding her as best she can. His first instinct is dismay, because it can't be good for Eri to see Nighteye like this, but he can see why Rei brought her here.

For all that Chisaki has been tossing him around like a ragdoll, he's left the area around Nighteye more or less alone. If Nighteye were

caught up in the turbulence, he wouldn't last long.

He's going to die either way, if they don't get help soon. Apparently Chisaki doesn't want that to happen too fast.

A threat of white-hot rage drifts into the fear roiling in his stomach. He fights against it, trying to drown it in forced calm. It's dangerous to get angry in a fight that he's already losing, but he's trying to think of a new plan, and there just isn't one. Their only hope is for Togata to find out Chisaki isn't in the other tunnel and come back to them. His only option is to stay alive and drag this out. He could send Rei to fetch him, but he's not sure he can keep Eri out of Chisaki's hands by himself.

"Does anyone know where Togata is?" he asks the ghosts around him. Blood runs down is face from a cut near his hairline, sticking in his eye.

There's murmuring among them. It may take some time for them to have an answer, and he doesn't have time.

"Nighteye?" It hurts to look at him. He's seen worse on ghosts, of course he's seen worse, but it's different when Nighteye is still alive and he can't just will those awful wounds away with a change in his mood. "If you use your quirk on me, could you tell me how long it'll take Togata to get back?"

The hero looks at him with dull eyes, and Izuku's heart sinks again. It's an optimistic question to ask, because it bears the assumption that he'll survive long enough for Togata's arrival to show up in his future.

"I'm sorry," Nighteye rasps. "I'm so sorry—before Chisaki left, I looked. I looked into his future." He breaks off with a wet cough, and a dark trickle down his chin reaches his collar to stain it deep red.

"You might as well tell me," Izuku says wearily. "According to you, it's not going to make a difference anyway."

For a moment, Nighteye hesitates. Then—"He kills you," he says, and every word sounds like an apology. "He takes Eri and kills you when you try to stop him from leaving with her. He escapes."

Ah.

Well, that was one of the things he expected.

“Oh,” he says, and then, “Okay.”

Chisaki approaches them at a leisurely pace. Izuku braces himself to start moving again. He has to draw him away before he gets close enough to reach Eri.

“This can stop at any time,” the villain says, and Izuku contemplates spitting at him before he realizes that Chisaki isn’t looking at him at all. “This doesn’t have to continue, and you know that.”

Caught between Rei’s arms, surrounded by twisting shadows, Eri trembles under Chisaki’s stare.

“Stop this pointless rebellion, do as you’re told, and come back where you belong,” Chisaki tells her. “Do that, and this will stop. I’ll even put them back together for you, good as new.”

“You will?” Eri’s voice is small, but for now the room is still enough for the sound to carry.

“He won’t,” Izuku says loudly. “He’s lying, Eri. Believe me, I know a liar when I see one.”

“Such a hypocrite you are,” Chisaki says to him. “You preach goodness and safety and freedom, while trapping her from doing what she truly wants.” Rei’s angry snarl almost cuts off his next words. “You claim to care about her, but you won’t even allow her this one choice. Heroes like you really are a sickness.”

The rage slithers upward in his chest, eager and hungry. “Yeah, sorry, it’s terminal,” he says. He looks at Chisaki’s jacket, his pockets, even the folds of his shirt underneath, searching for the telltale shape of a handgun. “I’ve been trying to cough in your stupid face all day. Maybe you'll catch some basic decency.” He doesn’t see anything. Where is it?

Chisaki barely looks at him before his body partially liquifies again and flows straight to where Rei and Eri are standing.

Izuku yells, but his voice is drowned out when Rei’s head splits in half at the jaw, her shadows go wild and half-swallow Eri in darkness, and Rei *screams*. Fear explodes outward from her like a wave of force, churning Izuku’s insides until he almost throws up. He’s not the only one who feels it; Chisaki’s viscous form stops in its tracks and convulses violently in midair. It almost hurts to watch, like magnetic liquids meeting and reacting violently to each other.

Throwing caution to the wind, Izuku rushes toward them.

Hands catch him by the elbow and nearly wrench his shoulder pulling him back. “Pro-tip, kid, that’s point for point how I bit it,” Magne hisses close to his ear.

“I have to,” Izuku chokes out. “I have to get Eri, or—they said Chisaki might have those bullets, and maybe—”

“Did you bother checking the other one first?” Magne asks. "Nemoto ain't an Expendable."

Izuku stops in his tracks.

“Sir, when you dealt with Nemoto, was he armed?” he asks.

“Handgun,” Nighteye replies. “Dropped him before he could shoot. Ground changed before I could take it.”

“I’ll be right back,” he says, and takes off in the direction the ghosts are pointing. Even without the help, even with the drastically changed landscape of the cavern, Izuku can still see the dark, limp shape of Nemoto’s unconscious body. He’s draped against a few spikes and pillars, lying at their base instead sticking on the ends. It seems that Chisaki took care not to kill him by accident; either he does care about some of his henchmen, or he was worried about damaging the gun and its special ammunition. It’s fine either way: with Nemoto alive there’s one less ghost loyal to Chisaki, and Izuku is just as capable of using the undamaged gun as anyone else.

He’s less than halfway there when he drops.

He doesn’t register it as pain, at least not at first. But all at once, a feeling of *something is wrong* washes over him, and in the blink of an eye he’s on the ground like a downed deer. A split second later the pain hits him, blinding, white-hot and intense. He looks down and finds a long spire of concrete sticking straight through his thigh from back to front. Unlike Nighteye’s, it was thin enough to snap off when he fell, and leaving a concrete spike about a half-meter long sticking through his leg like a javelin.

“Watch out!” Scattered, ragged warning cries reach him. Izuku rolls over on his back just in time to see Chisaki’s shapeless form flowing swiftly toward him. He tries to scramble backward, but the torn-up ground and the spike in his leg slow him so severely that it hardly makes a difference.

Another rattling scream rings out, and a familiar mass of shadows overtakes Chisaki immediately. In an instant Rei is materializing over Izuku, placing herself firmly between him and the oncoming danger, and Izuku sees the villain's ploy.

"Rei, *no! Go back!*"

It's too late. The moment Rei starts taking shape over Izuku, the liquid flesh retreats at a rapid rate. Heedless of Izuku's screaming, Chisaki regains his shape and grabs Eri, who now stands alone and unprotected.

The terror freezes on her face. She doesn't fight him or run away. She just watches him with wide, unblinking eyes and goes very, very still.

"Oh, Eri," Izuku hears the villain say. "If only you hadn't been so much trouble. You might have saved them."

Chisaki turns his head just enough to meet Izuku's eyes, and lifts his hand.

The room goes wild again.

Ghosts buoy him up, dragging and tossing him away from the danger, lending him the speed he doesn't have. Izuku narrowly misses death more times than he can count, before the heaving finally abates. When it does, and the tearing and groaning of concrete finally goes quiet, he can hear Eri screaming. She isn't struggling or fighting, but she's digging her fingers into the arm Chisaki has around her, screaming bloody murder as her captor tries to kill him.

"Let this be a lesson to you. This is what happens when you spread your curse to others."

Izuku is sick and tired of hearing Chisaki's voice.

Something cold and hard is pressed into his hands. He looks down to find Rei, wide-eyed and shamefaced, manipulating his fingers to grip it. The sparks of One For All are beginning to fade from her form as she passes Nemoto's handgun into his grasp.

While Chisaki is looking at Eri instead of him, Izuku aims and fires.

It hits, and he knows it hits because Chisaki's form goes haywire again. It ripples like liquid, and for a moment it's almost as if he's lost control of his own shape. The arm holding Eri turns to sludge, only to

solidify around her again, tighter this time.

(Izuku could swear, just for a moment, that her horn looks longer than it did before.)

Chisaki rounds on Izuku again as he limps closer, hands trembling around the handgun. His face melts and unmelts, before the bullet finally pops free of his shifting flesh and bounces harmlessly off the ground. “Nice try,” he snarls, eyes burning with rage over the edge of the mask. “But the Trigger in my body can counter even the permanent serum. I’m powerful enough to destroy it before it destroys my quirk.”

“Trigger won’t last forever,” Izuku retorts.

Chisaki’s hand comes up again. “It will last long enough.” The room trembles as he prepares to mold it again.

Something strange happens. There’s a burst of something like light, and Izuku can’t pinpoint the source at first. But he’s distracted when Chisaki’s body goes haywire again, as if he’s been shot with another bullet. His form melts so severely that he drops Eri, and she tumbles to the ground but never, not even for a moment, stops touching him.

It’s coming from her, Izuku realizes through the haze of pain and held-back fury. It’s coming from her horn, which has grown from a tiny sprout to half the length of her hand.

And then Chisaki snaps back into shape, and Eri scrambles away from him. He doesn’t go after her at first, because he’s too busy trying to contort his body again, trying to wield his quirk from afar, but it just isn’t working.

She rewound him. She sent him back to before he took Trigger—

Izuku is already running, somewhat. It’s hard to run properly with his leg skewered, but a little adrenaline goes a long way.

Chisaki touches the ground and sends up a wall to block him, then lunges for Eri. He grabs her again, and this time she twists and screams. Ghosts shout warnings to Izuku, but he blocks them out. He crumpled once. He almost let someone take her *once* and it’s not happening ever again.

He reaches for her, and she reaches back for him. He gets close enough to grasp her hand, then her shoulder, and drags her bodily out

of Chisaki's arms when the villain's hand reaches out. Izuku moves on instinct alone, twisting away to shield Eri's body with his own. Chisaki touches his shoulder.

There's pain.

That's the first thing he registers, and for a moment or more it's all he can register: so much pain, crashing in all at once, that he can't fit anything else in his head. He pulls away when he finally remembers to do so. The touch vanishes and the pain vanishes with it.

And then there's rage.

There was so much pain within him, filling him up until he was bursting with it, that with it gone, there's a split second of sucking emptiness before his eyes fall on Chisaki, and he remembers that he is angry.

And suddenly, anger is all that he is.

His fist is flying into Chisaki's face before he can think of anything else. Cold satisfaction floods through the burning fury when it connects. He hits him again and feels bone give way under his knuckles. He hits and hits until he feels blood running over his knuckles, and his heart *sings*.

He might be screaming. He might be doing a lot of things. It's almost refreshing to find that he doesn't care, he doesn't care about what else is happening. There's no room for other concerns. There's no room for thought. There is only rage, and vengeance, and the overwhelming desire to hit him again, to make him bleed, to take Chisaki's throat in his hands and squeeze until he can tear the ghost right out of his body.

...Wait.

Wait, that's not right. There are other things to think about. There's Nighteye. There's Eri. Where's Eri? He was just holding her, wasn't she? Did Chisaki take her back?

Fear joins the anger. They churn together, just as all-consuming, but now diluting each other. Izuku blinks, his eyes clear, and he looks at Chisaki to find him empty-handed.

He's also standing still, staring at Izuku with—shock? Confusion? ...Fear?

That can't be right. Why would Chisaki be afraid of him?

Izuku looks around, as if the concrete spikes can offer an answer, and finds Nighteye's face instead. The hero's expression is disturbingly similar to Chisaki's, but there's no fear in him. It's more like…

What's the word for it? Why is everyone staring at him? He's fighting a villain. He's a hero. That's what he does. What's so shocking about that? Is there something on his face?

He looks down at himself, and it takes a moment to comprehend what he's seeing.

"Oh," he says when he finally does.

His arm's gone, that's a good place to start. The shoulder's gone with it, along with a good portion of his chest. That could explain why Chisaki looks afraid, why Nighteye looks shocked. Izuku's a little shocked himself, because he shouldn't be able to fight like this. Adrenaline is one thing, but… this… he shouldn't be able to move. How is he even still standing?

He looks at Chisaki again. Chisaki looks back. His eyes flicker to a point somewhere behind Izuku, and Izuku turns.

He's lying amid broken concrete and fallen spikes, crumpled up with his arm and shoulder and part of his chest missing. The ground beneath him is soaked with blood. Eri crouches by it, wide-eyed and mute with shock. Beyond her, Chisaki's army of vengeful ghosts gape openly. For once, they're all silent, every last soul, looking either at him or at the pitiful crumpled thing on the ground—which is also him.

That's his body, Izuku thinks. He's standing up and looking down at his body.

"…Oh."

He looks down at his hands, and wonders if they're pale beneath the gloves. He wonders if his eyes are white.

"…Okay."

He turns back to Chisaki. The rage is still there, churning and violent, but it's diluted with other things. Fear, yes. Dread. Determination. Hope, brought on by the sight of blood and bruising on Chisaki's face.

He can *touch* him.

he wants to touch him, wants to hurt him, he hurt eri hurt nighteye hurt everyone, everyone in this room is dead because of HIM

The emotions are loud, louder than they've ever been before. They ought to be; without a body, they're all he has. They're all that he is. It's like a whirlwind inside of him, and if he isn't careful, he'll lose himself to the howling storm.

"So, that's a problem for later," he says out loud, and even his own voice sounds strange to him now. "I'm gonna beat the shit out of you now."

Chisaki breathes in through the mask, and Izuku slams into him before he can speak. The force of the blow sends him flying through the jagged terrain he made himself, and he only avoids shattered bones by destroying each spike and ridge as he crashes through them. When he comes to a halt at least, still battered and bleeding in spite of his efforts, Izuku is upon him, beating him back down with his one remaining fist. The taste of blood is sharp on his tongue, and the storm inside of him wants more.

Struggling upright, Chisaki slams his hand into Izuku's broken chest, but nothing happens. His quirk can't touch the things that ghosts are made of.

"How," Chisaki rasps. "How—I *killed* you."

Izuku spits the memory of blood. He thinks back to before Chisaki did what he did, before his body was torn apart and broken, and when he looks down again, his arm is good as new.

"Looks like it," he says. "What's your plan now, Kai?"

He looks into Chisaki's eyes and sees fear bleeding through. Izuku's heart isn't doing much beating at the moment, but he still feels hope in it all the same.

Mirio races back and forth from one end of Tunnel 5N to the other, leaving dazed and unconscious villains in his wake. Quite a few that he comes upon are already incapacitated, and that just makes his job easier. He doesn't even need his usual underground tricks to take out the rest; bullets fly straight through him, and none of the villains seem to have a plan beyond shooting at him.

At one point, instinct takes over before common sense can rein it in, and he drops beneath the feet of a hulking pyrokinetic hopped up on Trigger. There's no getting around it; he can't predict flames well enough to slip through them, so he brute-forces his way through the fight and drops the man before he can burn the whole tunnel and everyone in it. Luckily, the Trigger effects are almost up, and unconsciousness snuffs out his quirk rather than sending it further out of control.

Mirio pauses, breathing hard, and curses himself when he spots a bloodied knife lying on the floor right where he dropped through. He forgot about Toga's knife; the blade was the only thing keeping his wound from bleeding faster.

Gritting his teeth against the pain, he tears another piece from his cape and stuffs it into the wound. It's not the best first-aid job, but it's the best he's going to get, and it won't fall out if he uses his quirk.

Running footsteps set him on edge, before he rounds a corner and almost collides with Ryukyu and her interns. Froppy has a bandage around her arm and Hadou looks half drained, but they're all still in one piece.

"Is Mimic taken care of?" he asks.

"He's been delivered to police custody," Ryukyu replies. "Anything to report?"

"Eraserhead has been captured," Mirio replies, and winces when Froppy and Uravity gasp. "And we had word that Overhaul was somewhere in Tunnel 5N, but I've searched back and forth and I haven't found anyone but yakuza footsoldiers. I ran into Toga Himiko, though. I don't have a radio on me, so I couldn't call it in, and I had to prioritize finding Overhaul." He winces. "If I'd known he was already gone I wouldn't have left her."

"I'll have someone retrieve her," Ryukyu assures him, and turns on her radio to do just that.

"It's all right, I can go back for her," Mirio says. "She was in the part of the tunnels that Mimic changed; I know where I left her and I can get back to her faster." He starts to turn back, then pauses. "Can you get in contact with Nighteye and Deku? They're guarding Eri, and they should know that Overhaul's still in the wind."

"We'll take care of it," Ryukyu assures him, and Mirio takes off

through tunnels and walls, back the way he came.

He's already out of earshot when Ryukyu and her interns try to contact his mentor and kouhai, and get no response.

Eri curls up at the base of a concrete spike and makes herself as small as possible.

She doesn't make a sound, doesn't move even to cover her ears against the sound of the ground rumbling and ripping up. She doesn't cry. Her head hurts. Her skin feels hot. There's a buzzing underneath that makes her itch. She doesn't know what to do.

The blood on the ground almost reaches her feet. In the middle of it, Deku lies with his eyes closed as if he's only sleeping. Beyond him, the man that everyone calls Nighteye still hangs on a spike over his own patch of blood.

He's dying, and Deku is already dead on the ground. Eri knew this would happen. Chisaki told her it would happen. She always knows what's going to happen, when Chisaki is around. Chisaki gets mad and people die. Chisaki puts her in the chair, takes her apart, and puts her back together, Chisaki sends people to be nice to her, but no matter how soft they talk or how many toys they bring her, they still take her to Chisaki when he tells them to. That's what happens. She knows that.

But she doesn't know what's going to happen now. A lot of things have happened that have never happened before, ever since Deku first touched her. She's never spent so long with people who don't hurt her (shots don't count, Deku says). She's never heard anyone say that Chisaki is wrong and Chisaki is a liar. She's never fought and struggled and screamed before.

(She did it because he *was* a liar. She didn't fight him when he tried to take her again. She stayed still and let him touch her and pick her up, and he still turned around and tried to kill Deku again. He's a liar, and that means Deku was right, and that's why… that's why she…)

But most of all, she's never seen someone get back up after Chisaki killed them. Not without Chisaki putting them back together himself.

She's never seen anyone beat Chisaki before, either, and she hasn't seen that yet. Deku is still fighting, pale and grinning and scary, scarier than anything Eri has ever seen before, but he hasn't beaten

Chisaki yet.

But. She's seen all the other never-befores now. So… what if…?

She doesn't know.

Suddenly, Eri is cold again. That means *she's* here.

Rei is scary like Deku is scary—not *at* Eri but around her. Rei points her scary at other people.

"*I'm sorry.*" Rei talks funny. Her voice is always like a whisper. Even when she screams so loud it hurts Eri's ears, there's still a *husshh, hussshhh* behind it.

"You should've stayed with him," Eri says. "You came back to protect me instead of him, and now he's dead."

Still fighting, but still dead. What will he happen when there's nothing left to fight? While he disappear?

Rei holds out her hands. The sparks inside of her are fading. Every now and then she disappears and reappears, as if her whole body is blinking.

"*I'm running out,*" she says. "*I can't stay like this. My little brother can't, either. We'll disappear soon.*"

Eri closes her eyes. Of course it doesn't matter in the end. Of course it couldn't last. Nighteye will die, and Deku and Rei will disappear, and Chisaki will take her back before Lemillion or anyone else finds them. Of course, of course, of course. Maybe Deku was wrong and she really is cursed.

Cold hands hold hers, and she opens her eyes. Rei's eyes drip like she's crying, but it's all black instead of clear tears.

"*Help him,*" she says. "*Please?*"

Eri stares at her, eyes wide. "I can't."

"*You can.*" The hands squeeze, and the cold spreads from Eri's fingers all the way up her arms. "*I saw you. The man who hurt you—he changed himself, and you put him back the way he was.*" More black stuff pours from her eyes, and a little from her mouth when she says, "*Please? Please put my little brother back the way he was. I don't want him to die. I don't want to leave yet.*"

“I’ll hurt him,” Eri whispers. She remembers arms around her, holding her and lifting her until suddenly they were gone, and the warmth was gone, and everything was *gone*.

“*He’s already dead,*” Rei whispers, and then she’s gone.

No more shadows, no more black eyes, no more cold hands. All that’s left is blood and rocks and the pain in Eri’s head, and the hot buzzing and prickling under her skin. It’s all over her and inside her, it’s growing and pushing, it wants out, out, *out*

She doesn’t cry. She doesn’t ask any more questions. There’s no one to ask, and she already knows what the answers are.

Eri crawls through blood and dust and broken concrete.

Izuku aims another punch at Chisaki that passes through him, and he almost loses himself again. It’s all he can do just to keep himself together. The pain is fresh in his mind, and when he thinks too much about it, his left arm forgets that it’s allowed to be there. His mouth never quite loses the taste of blood.

He pulls himself together, more literally than usual, and his next blow connects.

Just a little longer, and Mirio will be here. That’s all he needs to do: buy time. Just a little longer, and then he can fall apart. As soon as he’s finished doing what needs to be done, then whatever happens will happen.

(*he’s dead, and One For All will die with him*)

Chisaki keeps touching him, grabbing him, but it doesn’t mean anything anymore. His quirk can’t hurt him anymore, and even when Chisaki hits him the pain is distant, as if it only hurts because Izuku knows that it should. He’s not feeling it, only remembering it.

Another punch turns to mist, and Chisaki’s eyes glitter with frantic hope. “You can’t keep this up forever,” he says. “You’re only prolonging the inevitable. And why should you care, anyway? I’ve already killed you.”

The rage takes over again, and his arm and shoulder vanish before the next punch can land. He opens his mouth to answer, and all that comes out is blood and screaming.

“You’ve failed,” Chisaki says, and his voice grinds like sand in the cracks of Izuku’s control, irritating and constant and inescapable. “You haven’t just died. You’ve died for nothing."

(*One For All dies with him*)

He screams again, just like Rei, like Tsubasa and the Noumu ghosts, like Okumura and Eri’s father and Sachi on the beach and countless others. He screams because he’s made of fear and despair and pain and helpless rage, and he can’t even properly feel how much it hurts.

“*Deku!*”

The voice cuts through the storm, punching straight through the whirlwind until it reaches Izuku in the eye. Blood pours from his lips as he turns to follow it back to where Nighteye stands, still upright and clinging to life.

“He’s *goading you,*” Nighteye rasps. “Don’t fall for your own trick.”

Right. He’s *right.*

Izuku struggles against the choking rage, fighting to tamp it down until he can think clearly again. Familiar cold hands clutch his arm, and the chill spreads through him, breathing life into the spark of focus buried under the anger. The cool determination amplifies, diluting the rage until he can finally bleed it off and pour the excess into a ruthless punch to Chisaki’s stomach.

The villain gags. Izuku hopes he’s puking into that stupid mask.

He can feel himself flickering. Already he’s used too much strength all at once; he’ll run out before long, and what then?

A half-familiar voice breathes against his ear. “*Don’t be mad,*” Rei whispers. “*I asked her to.*”

Before Izuku can ask her what she means, Chisaki’s eyes flicker past him, and go wide.

“No,” he hisses. “*No*—”

Izuku feels a tug.

It comes from somewhere in the pit of his stomach, like a hook caught in his core and slowly dragging him back. He turns, following the line of Chisaki’s eyes.

Eri stares back at him from where she's crouched over his body, clutching his hand with both of hers. Her horn, now the width of her hand, lights up like a star.

Chisaki lunges for her, with Izuku close behind him. The world turns sideways and inside out, and then, just for a moment, it vanishes.

Reality slams back into him with the force of a bullet train. His senses drown him, his lungs are empty, and it's all he can do to open his mouth as wide as his jaws will allow and swallow down a desperate, starving breath. It's not nearly enough, so he takes another, and another. He can feel again. He can see and hear and smell and taste and *breathe* again. He didn't spend long without those things, only a few minutes at most, but it was easy, *so easy* to forget.

He lies there and breathes again, curls his fingers into fists. One hand, and then the other. He squeezes until the nails dig into his palms, and he breathes.

A hand comes hard across his face, shattering the stunned piece. His eyes clear, and Magne's angry face looms over his.

"Get up," she snaps. "We're not done here." Shadows creep in from all sides as Rei makes her displeasure known. Magne flinches but does not draw away. "*Get up,* little hero brat. You know damn well what we're owed."

"Please." Eri's father's face joins the villain's, wild with desperation. "You have to get up. He's taking her!"

Izuku is on his feet so fast that his vision goes dark for a moment. By the time it clears, Chisaki has reached the opposite wall with Eri in his grasp. It's the very wall that he made himself, to block off their escape route. With one touch, he tears it open.

Instinct tells him to rush forward and stop Chisaki himself, and it frightens him, how simple it would be to die again. It would take Chisaki no effort to destroy him again, and Izuku can't ask Eri to save him a second time.

His breaths still come in noisy gasps. The air down here is stale, but compared to the nothing of moments before, it's the sweetest that Izuku has ever tasted.

He takes in the darkness of the blood-strewn cavern. Nighteye. The ghosts. They fill the cave, scattered amid the pits and ridges and

spikes that Chisaki left. Chuuza is not among them; he hasn't seen her since the battle began, and he will never truly knowwhat happened to her.

None of them are watching him anymore. There's only one man drawing their eyes.

You know what we're owed.

There's only question left worth asking, in Izuku's mind: *Did she go back far enough?*

The answer comes in the lightning at his fingertips, spreading along his arms, overtaking his body until his veins course with power. It fills him up: five percent, then ten, then twenty and climbing until it can grow no further. He stands still, filled to the brim with every drop of power given to him. It knows what to do, and where it's needed.

He lets it go.

The change is palpable in the air. Izuku knows this, because he sees Nighteye stir, and he watches Chisaki stumble and look back.

The cavern is crowded, and for the first time, Izuku isn't the only one who sees it.

Chisaki turns to run, but even he can't move faster than the dead. Ghosts fill the escape route, blocking him in, surrounding him. A mass of shadows weaves among them, and Rei tears Eri from the villain's grasp. The ghosts part to let them through, too focused on Chisaki to care about the little girl with the sparking horn. They see Chisaki looking at them, and their voices shake the concrete.

The cavern rocks again, the ground undulates like an ocean wave, but the dead are unmoved. "Get back!" Chisaki roars. "Get away from me! You're dead! Every single one of you is dead!"

Their voices ring out, some with fury, others with eager, mocking laughter.

"*Look at him squirm!*"

"*Not so tough without all your little toadies, are you?*"

"*I can't believe was loyal to this slime. I served him and he threw me away like yesterday's trash.*"

“*Who’s the trash now, Chisaki?*”

“*You killed me! You destroyed everything I loved!*”

“*I never did anything to you! I didn’t even know you!*”

“*A little girl! You did that to a little girl!*”

“*The only sick one here is you,* ***villain.***”

“*Street bastard!*”

"*Scum!*"

“*Monster!*”

Izuku feels the whirlwind again, this time all around him instead of within. He’s at the eye of the storm, watching as the rage gathers and builds. Blank eyes turn to him, eager and grateful for the power he’s letting them borrow.

He doesn’t shout, but it feels as if his voice reaches every corner of the cavern.

“*Make him pay.*”

The storm swallows Chisaki whole.

“Hey, Tsuyu-chan,” Ochako says, pausing in the middle of the tunnel. “Did you feel that?”

Reluctantly, Tsuyu stops to wait for her. “We have to keep moving,” she says. “If we stop, then we’re more likely to run into villains before we find Fatgum.” Communications on the radio indicated that Fatgum’s comm was either damaged or malfunctioning. Ryukyu sent them as messengers while she and Nejire-senpai went looking for Aizawa-sensei.

To her surprise, Ochako shakes her head and stays still. Her eyebrows are drawn together, and she seems to be listening.

Tsuyu takes her hand. “The tunnels have been shaking for a while,” she says, more quietly. “It’s probably Overhaul, so we need to hurry.”

“I’m not talking about the shaking,” Ochako insists. “It’s not even shaking—Tsuyu, do you really not feel that?”

“Feel what—” Tsuyu’s voice dies in her mouth.

It’s not that she sees her breath. But there’s a certain feeling she gets when she sees it without expecting it; a feeling of *wrong* and *be careful* that might have something to do with how the cold affects her. It’s hard to explain, but it’s the closest she can come to putting the feeling of that tunnel into words.

Tsuyu knows better than to ignore her senses when they tell her something is wrong. She squeezes Ochako’s hand and steps closer, listening. There’s nothing. She can’t hear anything.

“I don’t know,” she says at last. “But we need to keep moving.”

They continue on, without letting go of each other’s hands. The feeling doesn’t fade, and eventually Ochako stops again, this time at a cross section of tunnels.

“Ochako, come *on*,” Tsuyu urges, and the feeling of *not-right* grows and grows until—

“Oh. Oh, thank *goodness*.”

There are no footsteps, not even a disturbance in the air, just silence in one moment and a voice in the next. Tsuyu whirls around, tense and ready, only to stop short in confusion.

A woman stands about a stone’s throw away, watching them from one of the connecting hallways. She’s young-ish, maybe thirty, and the look on her face when she sees them is one of relief. At least, Tsuyu assumes she’s looking at them. It’s hard to tell when her eyes are empty white, without any visible irises or pupils.

Even stranger, the woman is soaking wet from head to toe.

She’s not dressed like a hero, nor does she look anything like the yakuza footsoldiers they’ve been seeing all over the place. She looks like someone shoved her into a pool fully clothed.

Ochako has gone still.

“I’m so very sorry to bother you,” the woman says. “I know you must be busy, but—please. He needs help.”

The hero in Tsuyu latches onto that hard, but the rest of her can’t let go of how odd this is. “Who are you?” she asks. “How did you get in

here?"

"There really isn't time," the woman says, as more water rolls off of her in rivulets, forming…

Wait. It's *not* forming any puddles. The ground isn't even wet underneath her.

Confusion turns to suspicion. Is this an illusion? A distraction?

Ochako steps forward, and Tsuyu opens her mouth to warn her back when her friend speaks first, eyes fixed on the woman in the tunnel.

"You're one of Deku's friends," she says. "Aren't you?"

…*What?*

The woman smiles. "I'm so glad I found you. It would be a nightmare getting anyone else to listen to me."

"Is something wrong with Deku?" Ochako asks. "Is he in trouble?"

"It was touch and go for a moment," the woman says, grimacing. "But I think he's all right for now. No, it's Eraserhead. He's in a lot of trouble right now, and there isn't a lot of time, so please—"

"Lead the way," Ochako says.

Tsuyu stares at her, appalled. "Ochako."

"It's okay," Ochako says, already hurrying toward the woman even as Tsuyu tries to hold her back. "I'll—we'll explain later, but we have to hurry."

"She's not even there!" Tsuyu squeezes her hand, pulled forward unwillingly toward the danger. "Ochako, look at the water. It's dripping off her, but there's nothing on the ground! There's no one there!"

Instead of realizing the deception, Ochako doesn't even look surprised. She turns back and fixes Tsuyu with a pleading look. "Please just trust me?" she says. "We have to help Aizawa-sensei." To the woman she says, "Lead the way, hurry!"

"Thank you," the pale woman says, and vanishes before their eyes. She reappears further down the tunnel, waiting for them.

Ochako runs after her without a moment's hesitation, and Tsuyu has no choice but to follow.

Shouta knows that something has changed when the sound of pacing stops. There's a rumble in the distance before silence falls again. For a moment, Shouta can barely even hear the villains breathing. There's a new note of tension in the air, like a subsonic hum that Shouta's ears can just barely pick up.

"Something's wrong," Kurono says tightly. The men with him stir uneasily.

"Should we leave?" one of them asks.

"Shut up," Kurono snaps. "You know your orders. We wait for a signal from Chisaki."

"Okay," is the subdued reply. "I mean, you were the one who just said something was wrong, so…" He falls silent at another barked order.

Shouta wishes he could see. Not moving is bad enough, but he loathes the blindness. He hates not knowing what is coming.

"We could ask," someone else suggests cautiously. "In case the situation has changed, and he's too occupied to inform us of any new orders."

"If he's occupied then I'm not going to interrupt him with your inane questions." The tension hasn't left Kurono's voice. He's nervous, and too young and inexperienced to hide it properly. "He's not to be disturbed until he has the girl in hand and the heroes guarding her are dead. We'll hear back once he's done with them."

Protective fury burns low and hot in Shouta's chest. Four of his students are out there. He should be helping them, not trapped and blind and surrounded by villains.

There were a dozen different ways to avoid this. Kurono had been aiming his quirk at Midoriya; if Aizawa hadn't taken the hit for him, then he could have taken the villain on himself and erased its effects. Hell, he could have pulled the kid out of the way instead of jumping between them like some boneheaded rookie.

Damn hindsight.

He waits, counting the seconds as they tick by. He's lost count of how long he's been here. He has no idea whether Kurono's quirk has some kind of limit, timed or otherwise. He doesn't know where he is in relation to any possible escape routes, or if any escape routes even exist. He can pinpoint the locations of the villains around him, but they keep shifting and pacing.

From the quiet, a crackle and squeal reaches Shouta's ears. It's the sound of a comm dying. Kurono fumbles it, demands an explanation over it. There's no reply.

The silence that follows is suffocating.

"Something's wrong," he repeats. "*Damn it.* He shouldn't be taking this long. The heroes should have been staining the walls by now!" He curses, kicks something in frustration. "Fine. *Fine*. We're leaving. We'll regroup with Chisaki outside."

"Should we take Eraserhead?"

A pause. "No," Kurono says. "He'll slow us down, and if anything has happened to Kai—which I highly doubt, but one can't be too safe—he'll be more trouble than he's worth."

He sighs, harsh and angry. Shouta indulges the faint hope that he'll be left here for one of his allies to find.

But no, of course not. The rasp of a blade—his own knife that Kurono took—reveals the villain's intentions.

"Oh well," Kurono says. "One less carrier to spread the sickness."

And then the temperature drops.

Or, it doesn't. The room doesn't feel any colder. Shouta's body just thinks it does, because every hair on his arms and the back of his neck is standing on end. Above him, Kurono goes still.

"Hey, buddy. I wouldn't do that if I were you."

It's the voice of a kid, still cracking and uneven in the midst of dropping in pitch. A teenager, but not one of his kids, nor Togata, nor Amajiki. His heart sinks when he doesn't recognize the voice. Yakuzas recruit kids when they can, and for an invasion like this, that requires a lot of cannon fodder…

“Who the hell are—” Kurono barks out, before one of his own underlings cuts him off.

“His head!” The tone leaps up in pitch. “What happened to his fucking head?”

Gasps. Shuffling, as if they’re drawing away. Are they retreating from a kid?

“Oh, this?” the kid says, cheerful and glib. “Got stabbed. I wouldn’t worry about it. You should probably worry more about your own selves. The others are busy tearing up your boss, but they might break off, get bored. After that, they’re coming straight for you.”

“What are you talking about?” Kurono demands. “Tearing up—that’s impossible. Anyone who gets close to Kai is as good as dead.”

There’s a beat.

The boy laughs. It’s a full belly-laugh, the kind that makes you double up and wheeze for breath. By the time the brief fit passes, Shouta can almost hear Kurono seething.

“I mean,” the kid says, still giggling. “You’re not wrong. Right on the money, actually. Smart guy, I’ll give you that.”

Realization blooms. Shouta would freeze in place if he weren’t already held still.

“What is *that* supposed to mean?” one of the villains mutters.

“How about this, smart guy?” the boy continues. “Remember Officer Shigeyama? ...No? C’mon, it’s not every day you break into a guy’s house, club his wife to death while he watches, and slit his throat. Do you really not remember? ‘Cause he does, and so does his wife.”

Another thick, heavy silence. “Who are you?” Kurono asks, and either he can’t hide the shaking in his voice, or he isn’t trying anymore.

“Just some guy,” the kid answers. “Don’t worry about me, I’m not gonna touch you, because you’re not my problem yet.”

“Yet?”

“Just walk away,” the boy says. “Go ahead, I won’t stop you. I’ve even given you a warning, right? About the Shigeyamas. Just put the knife down and walk away, and we won’t have any problems. Okay? ‘Cause

if that knife touches Eraserhead…"

There's another pause, and when the boy speaks next, his tone has shifted to a wavelength that vibrates in the bone marrow.

"**You're really not gonna like what happens next.**"

One of the villains swears and stumbles back.

"Oh, really?" Kurono retorts, calling the bluff. "What's gonna happen next, kid? What are you going to do?"

A few moments pass in silence again, stretching longer than the others. Shouta waits, still frozen and helpless, until some kind of verdict is reached.

"Oh, sorry," the kid breaks the silence. "Did you want an answer to that, or was it rhetorical?"

Kurono growls impatiently under his breath.

"Because the answer to that is…" The kid stops talking again, humming to himself as if in thought. Realization strikes again as Shouta abruptly understand what he's doing. "...mmm, not much, actually. Mostly nothing. Like, standing? And talking. Pretty much what I've been doing all ready, standing and talking."

"Do you think this is a joke?" Kurono barks.

"Just gonna keep doing what I'm already doing," the kid says gleefully.

"What?"

"*Distracting yooouu.*"

A shoe scrapes on the concrete, and the Shouta reads the disturbance in the air. Kurono is lunging closer, away from the kid and toward Shouta's body, knife raised. Suddenly the villain grunts, struggling against something.

"Let *go,* you stupid brat—!"

Something long and flexible whips around him like a lasso and yanks, dragging him to the side. A knife blade strikes the spot where he was just lying, seconds before a nearby villain yelps in surprise. Shouta can hear blows land, but he can't tell who's doing the hitting. More

villains cry out, their voices traveling upward.

“Thanks, Mrs. Kitayama!” the boy calls out. “Good timing.”

“You’re very welcome, Narita-kun!””

Shouta is set down gently and released, The blindfold is snatched off, just in time to see Uraraka drop back and join Asui in standing over him. Kurono is the only villain left standing; three others are trapped on the ceiling, and the rest are lying in dazed heaps on the ground.

He spares a moment to be peeved. His students just took down five villains in an enclosed space, and he missed it.

Uraraka looks back at him. “Are you okay, sensei?” she asks. Over her shoulder, the arrow-shaped mutation on Kurono’s head lashes out, heading straight for her. Shouta can’t even open his mouth to warn her. He strains to activate his quirk, but in his slowed-down state, it takes agonizingly long for the heat to build behind his eyes.

The arrow never reaches her.

The empty space between Kurono and Uraraka is suddenly occupied. A woman and a teenager seem to blink into existence, and instead of reaching Uraraka, the arrow hits the boy instead.

“Huh.” The boy looks down at the spot where the arrow struck. His speed of movement is noticeably normal. “That was a weird tickle.”

Kurono’s eyes bulge. He strikes again and again, but the boy and woman are unfazed.

The heat reaches its peak, his eyeballs itch, and Shouta finally, *finally* unleashes his quirk.

He’s on his feet the moment the arrow stops moving, his muscles screaming after being locked in place for so long. His student moves faster. Asui’s tongue coils and twists around the now-inert lock of mutated hair. She yanks down, and Kurono’s head bounces off the concrete like a basketball.

“*Oof*.” The boy hisses with sympathy. “Shigeyamas aren’t gonna be happy you stole their thunder.”

Asui doesn’t answer him. She looks at him briefly, then turns to Uraraka with the beginnings of a thousand-yard stare.

“He has a hole in his head,” she says faintly.

“Yep,” Uraraka says in a high voice.

“I can fit my whole finger in it!” the boy says proudly. “Wanna see?”

“That won’t be necessary,” Asui croaks, turning green.

Shouta lets the conversations watch over him as he finishes zip-tying the downed villains. They can be retrieved later.

He doesn’t know the boy. He knows the injury from crime scene photographs: a perfectly round puncture wound in the side of the head, deep enough to be instantly fatal. He never had the chance to meet the boy. He knew that already.

But the woman he knows. He swam away with her son in his arms before he could watch her die. Now she stands before him, dripping wet as if she just crawled out of the bay that drowned her.

She sees him staring and smiles, a little sadly. “Let’s leave that for later, shall we?” she says.

“Where’s Midoriya?” he asks.

“Follow us!” Narita chimes in. “We’ll take you to them. I mean, it didn’t look like he needed much help when we last saw him—”

“He will,” Kitayama says. “Let’s hurry.”

“Sensei?’ Asui looks from one face to the next, hopelessly lost. “Ochako—what’s going on?”

“Let’s get to Deku first,” Ochako tells her. “He can explain it best.”

“But—”

“I did mean hurry,” Kitayama calls to them. “There’s not much time.”

That puts an end to questions.

The cavern is unrecognizable.

Every now and then, the ground ripples with violent change. Izuku hasn’t seen Chisaki in quite some time, but he can see the results of his panic. The jagged landscape has been torn to shreds, and not all of

it reformed. Concrete tosses and turns like the ocean in a storm, giving away each moment the ghosts let him touch the ground. It isn't much.

They won't last forever, of course. Izuku can already feel it ebbing, as One For All leaves its dozens of temporary vessels and returns to him. The ghosts are solid enough to touch, to hurt, but not quite strong enough to kill on their own.

It's not for lack of trying.

Screams ring out as the dead begin to wane, and Izuku blocks out the noise and keeps pressure on the terrible wound in Nighteye's stomach. One particularly violent ripple had freed him from the spike through his stomach, and on the one hand it left Izuku free to drag him to safety, but on the other, the blood flows faster without the spike holding it in.

"It's getting quieter," Nighteye says.

Izuku can barely hear him. "Not to me."

"You need to leave," Nighteye tells him. "Take Eri—get out, before they all vanish."

"Can't," Izuku says. "Who else is gonna plug this hole?"

"Deku—"

"No."

"That's an *order*," Nighteye rasps.

"Just think," Izuku replies. "If you live through this, you can put it in my eval."

Nighteye coughs, turning his head to split blood onto the broken concrete. "Stubborn brat. I'm already dead."

"I think I know a dead person when I see one."

As if on cue, the familiar prickle of watching eyes runs up his spine. He feels the ghost behind him before he hears them, before Nighteye's bleary eyes flicker past him, and well before the hero gasps out a warning. Without moving anything but his head, Izuku looks up to find Magne standing over him, sparks fading from her body.

She holds her hand out to the side, the handgun loaded

with permanent quirk-erasers dangling idly from her fingers.

“Much as I’d like to stick around for my pound of flesh,” she says. “I have some people to talk to before I lose my chance. Something tells me you’re not gonna give me another one.” Izuku’s eyes are fixed on the gun, and she smiles and tosses it away. It clatters to the ground no less than ten meters away, well out of reach. “Have fun.” Without another word, she vanishes.

“You should stop her,” Nighteye urges. “She’ll go straight to the League.”

“I know.”

“If they find out about what you can do—”

“I know.” His vision blurs with tears. “But I can’t move.” Another ripple comes, quicker than the last. The edge of it nearly reaches them before it stops.

“If you don’t leave me,” Nighteye tells him, “We’ll both be dead.”

A scream rings out, high and clear and familiar enough to turn Izuku’s head. Chisaki, breaking free of the remaining ghosts, bends the ground beneath him to fling himself toward Eri. The girl is on the ground, curled up and clutching her head as her horn continues to spark and glow. Rei crouches over her, unhinges her jaw and shrieks in defiance, but there aren’t enough solid ghosts to hold Chisaki back anymore.

They’re all too far away to reach, and they won’t come back for more power from Izuku. They’re in a frenzy, they won’t *listen*—

“Deku!”

Izuku chokes down a sob. One of Chisaki's ground-destroying ripples took down the barrier blocking off the rest of the tunnels, and standing in the jagged doorway is Uraraka. The cavern shakes, but she stays on her feet and reaches him at a dead run. She’s not alone; Tsuyu is with her, and it should bother him that Tsuyu is there when a handful of ghosts are still visible, but there’s just no room left in him to worry about it.

“I have to go,” he says. “Here—keep pressure on, I have to—”

“Go,” she tells him, slipping easily into his place. “Hurry.”

“We called for help,” Tsuyu says faintly. “And Aizawa’s right behind us…”

Power ripples through him again. It’s less than before, but still he pours it into every ghost he passes, until he can feel himself scraping at the dregs. It won’t last long, but it doesn’t have to. Help is on the way. Every second he can buy is worthwhile.

Chisaki disappears into the mob again, screaming as they claw at him. Izuku runs past him to where Eri huddles on the ground, horn blazing like a star. Rei is trying to tend to her, but nothing works. Eri’s face is blank with terror. She looks like she’s about to pass out.

Arms catch Izuku around the middle, pulling him up short. He struggles, exhausted but still determined. “Let me go, I have to—”

“Don’t,” Eri’s father tells him. “Don’t touch her, or you’ll end up like me.”

Izuku goes still, frustrated. “But—”

“I’ll get her,” the ghost says. “She can’t hurt me anymore.”

Rei bares her teeth at his approach, but moves aside when she realizes who it is. Eri’s father gathers her up in his arms. If she realizes what is happening, or who is carrying her, she doesn’t show it.

The ghost takes a moment to hold her close, eyes shut as he touches his daughter for the first time in years.

More of One For All slips away from the ghosts, and the moment is cut short when Chisaki breaks free again. Izuku pours his last drops of energy into the ghosts close enough to get in his way. The edges of his vision go dark, but he stays on his feet and follows Rei, Eri, and her silent father back to the others.

They reach them just as Aizawa come through the opening, limping on a leg that Narita warns him is broken. His teacher stops short and stares for a moment, at the howling mob of the dead, the concrete floor and walls that come alive from time to time, and the pitiful group huddled at the edge of it all. A moment later, he joins them as well.

“Do I want to know?” he asks over the noise.

“You erase quirks, don’t you?” Eri’s father asks, still cradling her

gently. “Please, something’s wrong and she can’t turn it off. She’s burning up—I think it’s hurting her.”

It’s as simple as flipping a switch. The glow in Eri’s horn vanishes, and it shrinks down to a tiny nub on her forehead. Her eyes slip shut, and she goes limp in her father’s arms.

He quickly passes her to Izuku. “Sorry. I think I’m fading, and I don’t want to drop her—” The sparks of One For All vanish as soon as the words are out.

One by one the ghosts in the room lose their borrowed power, their solidity. They keep tearing at him, until it becomes clear that they can no longer touch him.

The fight is going to continue. They have a better chance with Aizawa here, but his leg is broken. Izuku wants desperately to get up, but the strength has gone from his legs and the tunnel vision won’t go away. One For All is back in its proper vessel, but his energy is just gone.

When it all dies down, Chisaki is kneeling in the middle of the crowd, shoulders heaving as he breathes. His jacket is gone, torn from his body along with the mask, which now lies discarded and out of reach. His face is scratched and gouged, blood drips from his nose and mouth, and one eye keeps squinting and shutting. His throat is dark with bruises, all in the shape of grasping hands and fingers.

But he’s still alive, still awake, still looking at them with murder in his eyes.

Izuku strains to get up, but a hand lands heavy on his shoulder.

“Don’t get up, Midoriya-chan,” Tsuyu tells him. “Help is coming, and if it comes to it, we can fight him instead."

Izuku swallows the lump in his throat. It’s part relief and part guilt for feeling relieved. He shouldn’t want to make someone fight for him, especially if they can’t afford to. Uraraka is busy with Nighteye. Even if she weren’t, she and Tsuyu are contact fighters, and there’s no worse way to fight against Chisaki. But there’s no other way, because Aizawa can barely walk and Izuku has nothing left to give the ghosts.

He’s so *tired*.

Chisaki climbs to his feet. There’s no smugness left, no more calm, easy arrogance and certainty of victory. All that’s left is base rage.

He lunges toward them, slamming his hand to a concrete ridge. Aizawa's eyes flash red, and nothing happens. Chisaki ducks behind the ridge, out of Aizawa's line of sight. In an instant, a wave of concrete spikes ripples toward them.

There's a blur of red and gold, shooting past them with the sound of a cape snapping, before it vanishes into the ground. The pillar hiding Chisaki shatters, and the wave of spikes halts close enough for Izuku to reach out and touch the tip of one. Chisaki goes flying out from behind his cover, doubled up and choking from a blow to the stomach.

Togata stands between him and the rest of them, and chances a look over his shoulder. His face is a mask of cold fury. Izuku has never seen him look like that before.

"Is everyone all right?" His voice doesn't shake. He is deathly, eerily calm.

Izuku is tired. Eri weighs far too little for a girl her age, but even she feels heavy to him now. Everything hurts. His face feels sticky and crusty with blood or tears or both. He doesn't even have the energy to lie.

"*No*." His voice breaks.

Togata's eyes burn with anger before he turns back to the villain, and in spite of the festering guilt and helplessness stirring in his gut. Izuku swallows a sob of relief. Someone else is fighting now. He doesn't have to get up anymore.

It's the single most vicious fight that Izuku has ever witnessed. Togata sends a bone-shattering punch into Chisaki's jaw, and Chisaki's lethal hands pass through him again and again. It's almost laughable, how little the villain can do against him. Except…

Togata is fast and skilled, avoiding death every time Chisaki reaches for him, but Chisaki only needs to get lucky once.

At their feet, dark metal glints in the scant light of the cavern.

"Togata!" Izuku yells, after he sends Chisaki flying back with a kick. Togata looks. Izuku raises one leaden arm and spells out a message with his hand.

In that moment of distraction, the villain doesn't try to kill him again.

His eyes fall upon Izuku, with Eri limp and unconscious in his arms, and he makes one last break for them. Concrete obstacles part to make way for him, and he reaches out with wild, hungry eyes.

Aizawa's eyes glow red, and Chisaki's hand is harmless by the time his fingertips reach Izuku's face. A shot rings out, and the villain goes rigid.

He turns, and finds Togata staring down the barrel of the handgun, as steady as a statue.

Togata squeezes the trigger again, and again, over and over until it clicks emptily in his hand, and every drop of Chisaki's own final weapon is coursing through his body.

Tsuyu's tongue wraps around Chisaki's neck and pulls him to the ground, and when Chisaki puts up a fight, she leaps on top of him and knocks him cold with a vicious punch to the base of his skull. In the silence that follows, Izuku can hear the distant rumble of footsteps.

"Friendlies are on the way," a ghost says helpfully.

"Oh, good," Izuku whispers. "Can somebody take Eri?" Aizawa is helping Tsuyu secure Chisaki. Uraraka is busy tending to Nighteye.

Togata drops the handgun. For a moment he pauses, eyes fixed on Nighteye as sickening fear creeps over his face. But the moment passes, and he kneels to take Eri from him. "I've got her."

"Good," Izuku says. "Because I'm about to—"

He knows nothing more.

Chapter End Notes

> CW: paralysis, guns, quirk removal, knives, syringes/drug use, body horror, severe and violent injury, impalement, temporary character death.

Chapter 59

Chapter Notes

Fanart tag

TV Tropes page

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hikishi Kenji, otherwise known as the villain Magne, hurries through the dark subway tunnels in search of her old comrades.

The tunnels are dark. When Overhaul's lackey took control of them, he knocked out a lot of the lighting on top of screwing with the layout. The dark doesn't matter to her as much as it did when she was alive, but she's still flying blind.

That's fine, though. As long as she keeps going up, she'll find them. She can dodge heroes easily enough, and she knows where the League's rendezvous point is. Her time is running short, with the hero brat's weird power on its way out, but she can make it. She can tell them this wonderful, vital bit of information about the kid Shigaraki was fixated on. They took him once and they can take him again. Take the kid, take the girl, and they'll be back in business.

They'll have to strike fast, while the Midoriya kid is still soft and tender and limping. No matter how many friends he has, those other dead idiots can't stop living villains from taking him back. And Magne's smarter than that Chuuza bitch. She can make sure there's no funny bullshit going on among the dead.

The rendezvous point is close, tucked away in some side tunnels that the heroes aren't using. Magne puts on an extra burst of speed, reveling in the buzz of power. This is the closest to *alive* she's felt since Overhaul killed her. And just think—once they have the kid and apply a little pressure in the right place, she'll be doing this all the time. It'll be like she never died at all.

She hears Shigaraki's voice in the distance, echoing in the tunnels as he bitches about something. Business as usual—and once Magne's done her thing, he'll be happy as a kid on New Years.

She opens her mouth to call out to him. Hopefully this won't spook him too bad. And if it does, hopefully the news she's about to deliver

will make up for it.

Before she can speak, hands close around her throat, mercilessly tight.

Magne doesn't need to breathe, but the sensation is still a shock. The grip around her neck squeezes with what would be bruising force if she had any flesh to bruise. She's yanked back off her feet, away from where she knows Shigaraki is. When she fights back, more pairs of hands latch on until she can't move. One clamps over her mouth, gagging her more effectively than the grip on her throat. They drag her, struggling and twisting like a snake, until she's too far away to call out. Her form scrambles with panic, but somehow, impossibly, they hold her.

And then she's on the ground.

And she is no longer alone.

There are people around her—ghosts like her, but not like her, because she can feel the rage and misery rolling off of them in waves. She stares up at them, first in fear and then in confusion, because she doesn't know them, at first. Their faces are unfamiliar, at first. They don't look like anyone she knew when she was alive. They barely even look like any other ghosts she's ever seen. Some of them stand under their own power. Others fuse and meld with the ones closest to them, flickering between one being and several. The only thing they have in common is their eyes: black, not white.

It's not until the smallest one steps forward that she realizes who—*what* —she's looking at.

Ragged leathery wings drag and hang uselessly from the boy's shoulders. His eyes weep with black ooze. When he opens his mouth, his voice rattles her to her core.

"*You were gonna snitch on Deku, weren't you?* "

She doesn't need to breathe. But she wants to, just so she can hyperventilate.

"I-I-I didn't do anything to you," she stammers out. "You were all—you were already like this, before I ever came, and I didn't even *know* — " The boy steps closer, with all the others hovering close around them. Magne presses herself back as far as she can.

"*He helped me* ," the boy says. "*He helped all of us.*"

"*All of us,* " a black-eyed woman echoes, her voice whispery and far away.

"*I did… bad things,*" the boy says, hoarse and mournful. "*I hurt him, and he still helped. I didn't even remember my name, 'til he called me.*" The rattle in his voice contorts into something that shakes the very particles of thought and memory that make her up. "***He helped you. And you were gonna rat him out.***"

"I wasn't!" Magne lies, and flinches when the sound of rattling spreads to the other black-eyed ghosts. The rest of her borrowed power trickles out, leaving her an empty ghost once more. "I-I won't. I can't. See? Power's gone. Can't tell them anything."

"***Good.***" The boy with wings steps closer again. "***And you're not gonna try again. Right?*** " The streaks of black drip down to his chin. "***You know what's gonna happen if you do. Right?*** "

"Yes! Fuck! I get it, just—I get it." Magne nods. "Fine. Won't tell 'em. Won't try. Just—don't touch me."

"*Wasn't gonna touch you.*" The boy smirks like a bully. "*But we're watching you.*"

"*Watching you.*"

"*Don't forget.*"

"*He helped us.*"

In the blink of an eye, the tunnel is empty. The ghosts and their black, staring eyes are gone. She's alone.

Magne lets herself fall apart, just for a little bit.

When Nighteye was still a rookie hero, young and raw with the ink still wet on his diploma, he once delivered an injured and delirious civilian to the paramedics. She was older than him back then, but now impossibly young in his memory, barely thirty and already shattered at the spine and bleeding to death.

The last he remembers of her is how she looked him in the eye as the medics lifted her into the waiting ambulance and said, in the calmest voice he ever heard, "If they put me under, I'm not gonna wake up."

And she was right; she died in the hospital twenty minutes later.

Morbid curiosity and persistent nightmares led him to check the quirk registry for her name. She had heat-resistant skin, nothing to do with any sort of clairvoyance. That was intuition alone, and nothing to do with quirks.

Now, as he lies in a hospital bed, stares at the ceiling, and tries not to look at or think about the tubes and wires protruding from the hole in his numbed midsection, he understands. Sometimes, the body just knows.

There's no pain, at least. A ventilator is keeping him breathing, and he feels nothing below the sternum, but he doesn't hurt. If he keeps staring at the blurry fluorescent lights above him, he can pretend that's because there's nothing wrong. He feels no worse than he ever has at his most overworked, half-giddy with exhaustion and fighting to keep his eyelids from slipping shut.

God, he's tired. They wouldn't even have to put him under, not when it feels as if he hasn't slept easy since…

Since…

Nighteye gives up forcing his mind to finish the sentence, and continues the laborious task of lifting his eyelids every time they close to blink. When he hears quick footsteps through the door to his room, he doesn't even bother turning his head. The nurses can do as they like to keep an eye on him and keep him comfortable. No one has said a thing to him, but he knows.

He cannot use his quirk on himself, but he *knows* .

The footsteps pause at the doorway, then enter at a slower pace. Nighteye allows himself another risky blink, wondering why this particular nurse is being so hesitant. Maybe they're new, and they haven't seen anything this bad yet.

He doesn't expect the touch to his hand, but he doesn't even have the energy to jump. It's enough of a struggle just to turn his head and squint, until the blur above him settles into something more recognizable.

A quiet sigh reaches his ears, deep and heavy with sorrow. "Oh, Mirai."

His next blink is a little less work. "That you, Toshi?" He barely recognizes his own voice.

“I’m here,” Toshinori says.

“Ah, good,” he says. “I wasn’t sure. Can’t see a thing.”

Toshinori gives a raspy chuckle. “Sorry about that,” he replies. “I’ll ask after your glasses, if you want.”

“Mm. Later.” His hand twitches, fingers uncurling and reaching. “I don’t mind.” His knuckle brushes the other hand, and after a moment’s hesitation, it settles on top of his.

“How—how are you feeling?” Toshinori asks.

He takes another breath through the oxygen mask. “Tired.”

“Ah.” Toshinori’s hand starts to slip away. “I can come back, if you want to rest—”

He’s not sure where the strength comes from, but he catches hold of Toshinori’s hand before it leaves, holding as tight as his limp fingers will allow. “Don’t.”

Toshinori’s shape goes still. “Mirai?”

“I’m not done,” Nighteye says. “Not yet. If I fall asleep, I won’t wake up.”

He hears the sharp intake of breath, even though Toshinori tries to muffle it. His old friend is still as a statue above him, a blur of bright yellow in the hospital lights.

“You can’t know that,” Toshinori tells him quietly.

“Can. I can see the future.” Truly, a pathetic attempt at a joke. Barely even a quip. But it’s the best he can do at the moment.

“Not your own,” Toshinori says.

Nighteye smiles, or tries at least. He wonders what it must look like. “Tables have turned, hm?” he says. “Now… I’m ready, and you’re the one who isn’t.”

His friend is silent for a moment, and it occurs to him that his words were a little crueler than he meant them to be. He takes a breath to speak again, but Toshinori beats him to it.

“Are you?” he asks softly. “Are you really all right with this?”

He thinks of the work he still has left to do. He thinks of the sidekicks under him, the mess he'll leave behind for them to clean up. He thinks of Mirio, who's come so far since they met and still has so much further to grow. He thinks of Midoriya, still young and raw and exploding with potential. He thinks of Toshinori, and the past six years gone to waste.

A lump forms in his throat, making it hard to breathe even with the mask. "No," he admits.

Toshinori squeezes his hand. His breathing sounds funny. "You know —for what it's worth, I wasn't either," he says. "I wasn't—I was frustrated. And afraid. Because I lost so much, and I gave up so much, and I always thought I'd have to give up everything in the end, and finding out that I was right… it just seemed unfair."

"Of course it was unfair," Nighteye starts.

"But I wouldn't—I didn't want to feel that way, so I told myself I didn't, and I told *you* I didn't, and I—" His voice breaks. "I pushed you away, on purpose, because you were one of the things reminding me why I didn't want to die. I shut you out because when you weren't there, when you weren't close to me, I could pretend I was all right, and I could pretend I had nothing to lose, nothing to leave behind, and I'm *sorry* , Mirai."

His eyes burn. The blur of light and color swims until he blinks, and the tears spill down to his temples.

Toshinori's breath rasps horribly. " *I'm so sorry.* "

He doesn't have much in the way of grip strength, but he squeezes Toshinori's hand with all he has left. "I gave up," he says, wishing he could see properly. "As soon as things stopped going the way I wanted —I said everything wrong, and when you fought me on it, I gave up. Didn't even try to stay."

Another quavering breath leaves his friend, and the hand holding him shakes. "Damn," Toshinori breathes out. "We wasted so much time."

Nighteye blinks away the wetness in his eyes. "How's your boy?"

"Izuku's all right," Toshinori says. "He's not hurt, just… hasn't woken up yet. He's exhausted."

In spite of himself, Nighteye smiles. "Not surprised."

Toshinori's thumb swipes over his knuckles. "How'd he do?"

"I was wrong, Toshi," Nighteye admits. "You do know how to pick them." Toshinori laughs softly. "And everyone else? Was anyone else injured? Or…?"

"A few injuries," is the reply. "But no fatalities. Snatch—you know, the Sand Hero? He had a close call, but he's fine. Rock Lock is recovering in the hospital. All other injuries are minor, including young Togata's. Nothing a few healing quirks and bed rest won't fix."

"Hm." Another slow blink. They're getting slower. "One."

"What?"

"One fatality," he says. "Could have been worse."

Toshinori's hand shakes. "Mirai. Please. Giving up on me is one thing. Please don't give up on yourself, not after all this."

Before Nighteye can answer, there's a commotion out in the hallway. Voices he doesn't recognize call out for someone to slow down, stop running. An apology is shouted back in a voice that he does. Running footsteps skid to a halt outside the door, and Nighteye suppresses a sigh.

Deep, deep down, he was hoping to be gone before Mirio had to see him like this.

"Sir!" Mirio stops short at the door. Nighteye can hear him breathing hard, as if he just sprinted through the hospital—that's not good, he was injured and should be resting, healing quirk or no healing quirk—

"It's not true, is it?" Mirio's voice cracks. "Eraserhead told me—he told me you were—" He enters slowly, with hesitant steps. "Please tell me he was wrong."

Toshinori takes a breath. "Well—we can't know whether—"

"*Don't,*" Nighteye rasps. He squeezes Toshi's hand for all he's worth, a silent plea for silence.

"Mirai," Toshi says in a plea of his own.

"Now's not the time," Nighteye murmurs. "Don't be cruel." Toshi's hand shudders in his grip.

A second patch of gold joins the first, to his dismay. The last thing he wants is for Mirio to watch him die, but he can't find the words to tell him to leave. He doubts the boy would listen anyway.

"Sir…" He can barely see how Mirio stands with his hands braced on the railing, leaning toward him as if he wants to reach out but can't. "Sir, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

What an odd thing to say. From what little Nighteye has been told—and what little he can remember—it was Mirio who brought down Chisaki in the end, though one of Ryukyu's interns dealt the final blow. "Whatever for?"

"I—" Mirio's voice breaks. "I should've been there, I should've been fighting with you. I should've been there to help, and I wasn't, I was so *slow*— "

"Odd," Nighteye murmurs. "I seem to remember you arriving right when you were needed."

"I didn't! I-I wasn't there until the end, when—it was already too late, and if I'd just been faster, if I'd been there, then Midoriya wouldn't be hurt and you wouldn't—you wouldn't be…"

"Mirio…"

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry I wasn't fast enough."

"You fought so well, Mirio. I couldn't be prouder." Mirio sobs, a broken, pitiful sound that sends cracks into Nighteye's heart. "I'm sorry, too. I wanted… to see what you would become. With my own eyes." *Living eyes,* he thinks. He will see it happen either way, but it isn't the same if it isn't a future that he can reach out and touch.

"I—I don't know if I can. Not without you."

It's getting harder to breathe, he realizes. Not that the mask has stopped working. But breathing takes energy, and his is slowly running out. "Now… what did I tell you… about selling yourself short?"

With the last of his fading strength he lifts his free hand, and feels his way to Mirio's face. His protege starts at the touch, before leaning into it as he tries and fails to swallow another sob.

Nighteye feels Mirio's tear-streaked face in one hand, and Toshinori's

hand in the other. He has two choices before him; something tells him he only has time for one.

He makes his choice, and the future stretches before him, moment by moment.

It is bright.

It is beautiful.

And then it is gone.

It hits him all at once—that is to say, nothing. It's a strange thing, to feel nothing. Or perhaps it isn't strange, because it isn't anything at all. That's sort of the point.

And then, a split second before he's almost gotten used to nothing, everything returns to him, blinding and raw and all-consuming.

Frustration. Sorrow. He doesn't want to die here, not when there's still more he wants to do. He's only just reunited and reconciled with Toshinori, only to die and leave him again. There's still more he wants to teach Mirio.

For once in his life, he *wants* to see the future play out.

As if in answer, his vision returns, only it's not what it was before. The blurry haze is gone, and the world unfolds before him in impossibly sharp focus. He's not lying down and looking up anymore. He's standing up on his own two feet, looking at Toshinori's hunched back as his friend leans over his hospital bed. Across from him, Mirio crumples like a puppet with its strings cut, sobbing.

Pain spreads through him the way the heart beats blood through the veins. This is wrong, he thinks. They aren't supposed to look like this, small and helpless in the face of loss. He knows them both, he knows how strong they are, and the world goes hazy as the ragged shreds of his mind scream in protest. Then it settles in sharp, unforgiving clarity, and he knows, he understands—

This is *his* fault, they're in pain because of *him* , because *he* wasn't strong enough, because *he* couldn't do something so simple as live for

their sakes, and he should fix this—

He should comfort them—

If he could just,

reach forward—

If he could tell them that it's all right, that he's here, he hasn't gone anywhere, then maybe—

Maybe the world won't fall to pieces right when he's just gotten it back —

He reaches out to them desperately, knowing in the midst of wild, mad hope that no matter how hard he tries, he won't be able to touch them.

A pair of hands catch hold of him, holding him back.

The anguish that makes him up churns violently, anger and frustration leaking in—how dare anyone stop him, how dare anyone try to hold him back—

"*Not yet*," comes the whisper, and the grip on his wrist gentles but does not vanish altogether. He rounds on the voice, and his eyes fall upon Midoriya Izuku's face.

"*Not yet,* " Midoriya repeats, eyes blank-white and unblinking. "*Let them be. Let them cry.* "

Confusion feels sharper now than it ever has before, and it bleeds into panic far too easily. "What are you doing here?" he asks. "Why—you can't be dead. You're n**ot supposed to be—**"

It seems as if he blinks, and the room with his friend, his protege, and his empty body are gone. They're standing in a different room now, quieter than before, and Nighteye looks to the bed and finds a small, plump woman curled over a hospital bed, holding a still, silent Midoriya Izuku's hand.

As he watches, the blanket slowly rises and falls.

"*I'm not dead,*" The Midoriya still holding his wrist says. His voice is odd, strangely soft and indistinct, as if he's not completely there. "*This part woke up before the rest of me did.*"

"Oh," Nighteye says softly.

"*I'll be all right,*" Midoriya tells him. "*Just worry about yourself.*"

The boy vanishes from his side, but before Nighteye can panic at the sudden solitude, an arm settles over his shoulder, more heavy and solid than he currently feels.

"C'mon," an unfamiliar voice says brusquely, and he glances over to find the ghost of a sturdy dark-haired woman quirking a sad smile at him. "Might as well say hello to the others."

Shouta is long accustomed to hospital rooms.

He's been injured before. He's been helpless before. He's even been captured before, on more than one occasion. Every time he suffers and survives, he is reminded of how many heroes have died in those situations, and how lucky he supposedly is not to be one of them.

He never feels lucky. He only ever feels tired, and resigned.

When he walks into Midoriya's room and finds the boy's mother holding his hand, whispering to him without any hope for a response, there is nothing he wouldn't give for the power to turn back time so he can give the past few days another try. It's not the first time he's felt that way, it's not the first time he's had to be the bearer of terrible news, and it won't be the last.

"The doctors say he's as healthy as can be." Midoriya Inko's voice pulls Shouta out of his troubled thoughts. She keeps her eyes on her son as she speaks to him. "A few bumps and scrapes, but no injuries besides that. He's not even unconscious, just asleep. They were wondering if he was under some kind of quirk, that's how deep it is."

Shouta nods, then bows to her. "I'm sorry that I did so poorly in protecting him."

"You don't need to apologize," she replies, her tone deceptively light. "I've been scared out of my mind since I heard about this mission of his. He's come out of it with scratches, and not a single broken bone. He'll wake up soon. He'll be alright." She heaves a sigh. "The worst thing that's going to hurt him from this, is that someone else died. And that's not something you could ever have protected him from."

Shouta disagrees, but says nothing.

When she finally looks over her shoulder at him, her face is heavy

with exhaustion. “I’ll tell him you came by, when he wakes up.”

Shouta inclines his head to her, and leaves the room in search of his other students.

He finds them all in one place: someone must have set aside a quiet spot for the student heroes, or they were simply lucky enough to find the little waiting room, out of the way and empty. Kirishima and Asui sit on either side of Uraraka, who stares down in silence at her own hands. Kirishima’s arm is around her, and Asui’s hand rests palm-up in Uraraka’s lap, a silent offer of comfort.

For his part, Shouta is not ignorant to Uraraka’s humble ambitions. She has no grand dreams of glory, only the simple desire to support herself and give her family comfort and stability. There are very few bad reasons to save lives, and in Shouta’s eyes, that is not one of them. He has never subscribed to the opinions of Stain and his ilk, that heroes should somehow rise above their physical needs. Saving lives has been a career since long before quirks evolved. Take that away, and you’d have to toss out the entire medical field along with it.

But there comes a point when a career path becomes more than just a paycheck, and Shouta can tell by looking at the three faces before him that they are coming to truly understand just how high the stakes are for heroes.

But now isn’t the time to talk about that.

Kirishima is the first to speak. “Is Midoriya okay?’

“He’s fine,” Shouta replies, and sees the tension leave the trio all at once. “Exhausted, but uninjured.”

“But Sir Nighteye isn’t,” Uraraka murmurs. She hasn’t taken her eyes off her hands. They’re clean of blood now, but Shouta knows from experience that she’ll be seeing the stains for a while.

“No,” Shouta says quietly. “The doctors did what they could, but he succumbed to his injuries.” Uraraka doesn’t answer, and he kneels down to her eye level. “That’s not on you. You know that, right?”

Her mouth tightens into a stubborn line.

“In missions like this, you can’t bear the weight of every mistake,” he goes on, looking at all three of them in turn. “And sometimes, there are no mistakes. Every hero can do everything right, and things can

still go wrong. That's not a burden for any one hero to carry."

Tears trickle down Uraraka's face, and she quickly wipes them away.

"That's one of the hardest lessons a hero must learn," Shouta says. "You can't save everyone."

"I want to," Uraraka says. "I want to save people, I want to save as many as I can—"

"And you will. You have." Shouta focuses on the girls for a moment. "Don't forget, you saved at least one life today." He's not just saying it to make them feel better; if the girls hadn't intervened when they did, then he would probably be dead.

"And Eri, too," Kirishima adds.

"Eri, too."

"I'm going to do better next time," Uraraka says. She doesn't speak it like a vow, or a hope. She states it like a fact.

"I know," Shouta says. "I believe you, Uraraka."

Throughout it all, Asui says nothing. She's barely taken her eyes off of him since he walked in. There are questions burning in her unblinking stare, a reminder of what she's seen.

Shouta lifts an eyebrow at her, and she lowers her eyes. She can wait for explanations, it seems.

An hour later finds him in a hospital restroom, trying not to zone out as he washes his hands. He stares at his own reflection and marvels at the lack of new scars. He hasn't gained any since the USJ; all of his injuries since then have been minor. He does look tired, but there are no new marks to grimly admire in his reflection.

Without warning, the temperature drops, and Shouta's breath leaves a patch as it ghosts over the mirror. Before Shouta can wonder what happened, an invisible finger traces letters on the fogged glass.

He's awake.

Suppressing a shudder, Shouta leaves the restroom behind and hurries back to Midoriya's room.

Sure enough, he walks in to find Midoriya half hidden in his mother's

embrace, eyes open and looking around the room. They fall upon Shouta, and the boy freezes. His mother pulls back to follow his gaze.

In the doorway, Shouta balks for a moment. Nighteye's death sits in the back of his throat, heavy and inevitable. Before him, Midoriya still looks exhausted, eyes unfocused behind drooping lids. It's only by virtue of the angle of the pillows behind him that he's sitting half-upright at all.

It's okay, Midoriya tells him in sluggish sign. *I already know.*

Relief mingles with dismay. He doesn't have to be the bearer of bad news, but only because Midoriya is already carrying it.

Words escape him. He's comforted people about death before, civilians and fellow heroes alike, but never anyone like Midoriya. With Midoriya, there's a possibility that Nighteye is still here, and Shouta doesn't even know how to ask.

His student's eyes stay on him for a while, and Shouta can see the gears grinding through the heavy exhaustion. After a moment, Midoriya shifts over and taps his mother's arm. His next signs are quicker, indistinct, more garbled for lack of a better word, and Shouta only picks out enough to know that Midoriya wants to say something to Shouta, but not her.

A quick discussion follows, half in whispers and half in sign, before she finally kisses her son on the forehead and gets up from the chair. "I'll be out in the hallway," she tells Shouta, and leaves the room.

"I'm not going to interrogate you right now," Shouta tells him. "There's time for that later. It can wait until you're ready."

Midoriya shakes his head. He reaches for the table beside his bed, where a notepad and pen have been left for him. His mother must have requested them, just in case; she knows her son well.

His handwriting is just as wobbly as Shouta would expect. The conversation progresses slowly, but he is patient.

I don't want my mom to know this yet.

This, of course, raises a few alarms. "I won't keep secrets from your mother where your safety is concerned," he says bluntly.

Midoriya shakes his head again. *I know. I'll tell her myself. But not yet.*

“Tell her what?” Shouta asks, and no amount of bracing can prepare him for what Midoriya writes next.

I died. Eri brought me back.

The shock doesn’t wear off. It can’t wear off, not for something like that. All Shouta can do is adjust to it.

“When you say ‘died’—”

The pen in Midoriya’s hand digs into the paper, scratching through a few pages. The knuckles gripping it are white.

I was dead. Chisaki killed me. Eri used her quirk.

Shouta feels panic growing in the distance, alongside many other things: terror, anger, overprotective fury. He wants to take the boy by his shoulders and shake him, to demand to know what the hell he thought he was doing, getting killed on what should have been Shouta’s watch. He wants to be angry with him for being reckless enough to be in that position in the first place.

He takes a deep breath, and pushes all of that away. At best, doing any of those things will make him look irrational. At worst, they will teach Midoriya to stay silent the next time something terrible happens to him. Looking at the boy now, with his head hanging so that his hair hides his eyes from view, Shouta can see that there is nothing he can scold him with that Midoriya doesn’t already know.

“I’m glad you’re telling me,” he says after a moment.

It’s a gross understatement. There were three people down in that cavern with Midoriya when most of this went down. One is dead, one is a small child, and one is a semi-comatose villain set to be carted off to Tartarus. Midoriya could have kept something like this to himself and no one would have been the wiser.

Eri’s quirk was not a sure thing. It could have failed outright, or it could have worked far too well.

Shouta could have hobbled into that cavern and found his student gone, one way or another.

His hand settles on Midoriya’s shoulder. It’s just as much for his own comfort as it is for Midoriya’s, a reminder that he is still alive and solid and real. “I’m sorry that I wasn’t there to help you.”

The shoulder spasms beneath his hand. Midoriya tucks his chin in. There are no tears.

It's Kirishima who sends out the first text, announcing both the end of their mission and the fact that all four of them emerged nearly unscathed. Word reaches the Class 1-A dormitory and sweeps through the crowded common room like a sigh of relief. Tenya doesn't realize he's been holding his breath until the news reaches his ears and he lets it out at last.

Then come whispers of a fatality, not one of their classmates but one of the supervising heroes, and Tenya finds himself catching Todoroki's eye from across the room.

Not a single member of the class is upstairs. No one has left the common room since news first reached them. Kouda is passing his rabbit around, keeping nerves settled.

Asui sends out the next text, letting them know that all four of them will be arriving soon, and the nervous atmosphere turns to relief and excitement. After spending all day sitting in radio silence, everyone is eager for news.

"Remember, everyone!" Tenya calls out. "Don't crowd them when they arrive! Give them space, and if they don't wish to talk, then don't press them!"

By the time the front door opens, Mika is in Tenya's lap. In spite of his own reminder, he can't help scooping her up and rushing to his feet. The rest of the class almost crowd them anyway, but Yaoyorozu plants herself at a distance and gives stern sidelong glances to anyone who looks ready to rush them. It works, and there's a healthy distance when the four of them walk in.

For a moment, the entrance hall is silent. Tenya looks over his classmates, takes in a few bandages and minor scratches and bruises. True to Kirishima's word, they all seem to have come out of it more or less unscathed.

And then Tenya looks at their faces, and knows that isn't the case.

For his part, Kirishima simply looks lost. He's smiling as he lifts his hand and calls out a greeting, but it's shaky and uncertain, especially when he glances back at the others.

Uraraka's eyes are red and puffy but dry, and her mouth is perfectly straight and tight on her face until she forces it into a smile.

Asui's face is carefully blank. Tenya hasn't seen this look on her since after the Kamino incident, when she was trying to pretend everything was all right.

And Midoriya…

Midoriya pauses in the entranceway, takes in the barely held-back crowd, and immediately backs away until the other three are in front of him. They let him without much fuss, with Uraraka shooting him a worried look over her shoulder. There's some milling around before Ashido breaks through and throws her arms around Kirishima.

"Hey guys!" she says. "I'm glad you all made it back okay!"

"It's good to be back!" Kirishima answers, and the tension breaks. Everyone converges on each other, cautiously at first, before caution is thrown aside in favor of camaraderie.

Except Tenya notes Midoriya edging around the outskirts, unnoticed. If Tenya hadn't been looking for him specifically, he might have missed him as well. Apparently he isn't the only one, because Todoroki catches up to him first.

"Midoriya?" Tenya keeps his voice down as he approaches. It's clear Midoriya doesn't want that much attention.

His friend looks tired. That's all Tenya can think of to describe it. He looks more tired than he's ever looked before in his life. He signs, and Tenya is still learning but he can recognize *I want to be alone right now.*

Without another word, Tenya holds out his cat. Midoriya purses his lips—it's not a smile, it's barely even an attempt—and takes her.

Todoroki doesn't say anything, just presses his shoulder briefly before letting him slip away.

"Might be best to leave him alone for now," Tenya murmurs. Todoroki nods once, then slips back to the others.

By the time Midoriya creeps back down and takes a place on one of the dorm couches, they've been told enough to know not to inundate him with questions. Within minutes, there's a cup of tea in his hands, Kirishima is leaning comfortably against him, and all topics of

conversation are strictly school- and pop-culture-related. Midoriya relaxes, and that's all anyone can ask of him.

Late at night, Shouto sits up and reads by phone light. He's resigned to being awake, resigned to the noise in his head that won't let up. Remedial training. Lessons to learn. His friends and classmates doing real hero work while he's still chasing, lagging, catching up, all while Endeavor looks on from the top and threatens to oversee his training in person. As if he doesn't have enough to keep him up at night.

And now his best friend, his closest friend, his whatever-they're-supposed-to-be-called is… what, troubled? Devastated? It's impossible to say, thanks in no small part to the fact that Shouto can't share in it, because he's still so, so far behind.

So now he's awake, mostly because he can't sleep, but also because he's fully ready for a knock at his door.

A few minutes before midnight, it comes. Shouto sets aside his book and his phone and goes to let Midoriya in.

"Can't sleep either?" he asks, once they're settled on his futon—sitting on it, not lying down to sleep. Midoriya releases Mika and lets her wander.

I want to be alone right now, he says. *But I don't think I should be alone.*

That's a feeling he can definitely understand. "You don't have to say anything about it," he says. "The others filled us in on what happened. Uraraka filled us in on… the other stuff."

Midoriya nods. *I just don't know what everyone will say about it,* he says.

Anyone who knows anything about heroics will understand, Shouto answers.

You don't know that.

Shouto hesitates. *I know that heroes make hard choices every day,* he says. *And I also know you tend to make the right ones.*

He doesn't know if that's comforting or not. It gets a thoughtful frown and not much else.

"Hey, Midoriya," he says.

I thought I said you could call me Izuku.

He rolls his eyes. “It’s not like you ever call me Shouto.”

Midoriya—Izuku—stares at him, surprised. Then, he spells out Shouto’s name, one character at a time.

“Glad we’re in agreement,” Shouto says, and Izuku sort of smiles. It’s not *quite* a smile. But he’ll take it.

And next time he's going to be there, so no matter what happens, he *will* understand.

“So anyway,” Ochako finishes. “Ghosts.”

“Ghosts,” Tsuyu agrees, sitting back. Her head tilts back until she’s looking at the ceiling. “This is a lot.”

Ochako remembers how her revelation treated her—easily, since she just recounted it to Tsuyu, along with the rest of what she knows. She and Iida have Deku’s blessing to explain things to Tsuyu, but it still feels strange and wrong to discuss his quirk without him.

“If you need time to process all of this new information, please let us know,” Iida says. “And please don’t feel bad for doing so. I know from experience, just how… overwhelming it can be.”

“Of course,” Tsuyu says with a soft croak. “But… I think I’m all right. You’re right, it is overwhelming, but… it explains some things that I’ve always wondered about. That helps.”

“And we do apologize for keeping secrets from you,” Iida says.

“No we don’t,” Ochako cuts him off, and ignores the sharp look he sends her. “This is Deku’s quirk and Deku’s secret, and I’m not sorry that I didn’t blab about it to anyone. Even you, Tsuyu.”

“No, you’re right,” Tsuyu assures her. “I understand that more than anything else. I understand a lot of things.” She taps her fingertip against her mouth thoughtfully. “The only question I have left is his second quirk.”

“Second quirk?” Iida echoes.

“His strength, of course,” Tsuyu says, ribbiting again. “The green lightning? Where did that come from?”

Ochako shrugs. “I just assumed he was channeling the power of the dead or something. The ghosts we saw in the tunnels had green sparks too, remember?”

“Mm, maybe.” Tsuyu frowns. “I suppose that’s as good an explanation as any, since none of us know much about ghosts beyond what Midoriya has told you.”

“I trust him,” Iida says firmly. “If there’s something that we need to know, then I trust that he’ll tell us. If he doesn’t, then I don’t believe there’s anything to be gained by prying.”

“Weren’t you just trying to apologize for helping him keep a secret?” Ochako points out.

Her friend splutters for a moment. “Midoriya’s discretion concerning secrets is not the same as mine,” he says. “While I am not personally comfortable with withholding information, I can understand that his situation is different from anything that *I* have personally experienced.”

“You’re a good friend, Iida,” Tsuyu assures him, and Iida splutters again, suitably pleased.

“I do my best,” he says. “Especially in times as trying as these.”

Ochako hums in agreement. It’s been the better part of a week since their internships ended, and they’re all finally settling down. Deku still isn’t speaking, and everyone’s been trying to be helpful, whether it’s by keeping him company or keeping him occupied. Even Bakugou, in his own way, is trying to be helpful, if only by staying away from him. He’s been spending most of his time with Kirishima, which Ochako is glad of. Kirishima’s the only one who didn’t make it to the deepest chamber of the base. She’s pretty sure he’s been feeling left out, even if it means he missed out on something unpleasant.

She can understand that feeling, too.

Tsuyu goes back to staring up at the ceiling. “Still… it’s hard to imagine. That much power, in one person.”

“He’s always been strong,” Iida points out.

“Not just that,” Tsuyu says. “I mean, just think. He has his strength, but he also has this… this invisible army that no one can see but him. They can be anywhere, and most people don’t even know they’re

there. It's the perfect quirk for surveillance, and in a pinch he can make them a physical threat as well. He's not just powerful, he's powerful in two different ways."

"Yeah," Ochako says softly.

"All of that," Tsuyu goes on, "and it still wasn't enough to beat Overhaul on his own."

"*Hey*," Ochako says.

"That's hardly fair," says Iida. "We're all first years, and this was his first internship. No matter how powerful he may be—"

"You remember what Aizawa-sensei told us," Ochako adds. "It's impossible for a hero to save everyone, especially by themselves."

"I know!" Tsuyu blurts out, sitting up to shake her head furiously. "Sorry. That came out wrong. Of course it was his first— *our* first. That's what I mean. It's just… we've been thrown into the deep end since we started. First the USJ, then the summer camp, and now this… Even Todoroki and Bakugou, two of the strongest people in class, didn't get their licenses. Even Midoriya, who's even stronger… even he was overwhelmed." She sighs. "Sometimes it still feels like we've barely even started."

It's a heavy bundle of thoughts to consider all at once. They're all so busy considering it that none of them notice the object of conversation listening at the doorway before silently backing away.

On the outside, the kid's doing a little better. Beyond that, it's anyone's guess.

If Izuku's talking to anyone, Nana isn't one of them. But that's… okay. She can understand that, because this might be the first time someone that he knows has died. She remembers watching Toshi spiral in grief after she died. Toshi's only doing a little better than he was back then, and Izuku… well. She thinks, she hopes, that he's doing okay. He's not isolating himself in his grief. He's not falling into any harmful coping mechanisms.

Quite the opposite, really.

"Where is he going now?"

Ah, that brings her to the main project on her hands. At the moment they're on a train, heading into town. Izuku's in a different car, bent over a piece of paper while a ghostly old woman dictates a note for him. Nana doesn't need to watch over him personally, not when he's accompanied by two of his living friends plus Eraserhead.

"Don't know," Nana replies, and can't help grinning at the mystified look on Nighteye's face. "The where's not really important. You'll see what I mean."

They get off near a residential area. Nana follows at a distance, smiling to herself. The kiddo's hemmed in with Uraraka on one side and Todoroki on the other, and Rei orbiting them all like a moon. Eraserhead follows at a closer distance, keeping a watchful eye on his kids as the old woman's ghost leads them through the neighborhood.

Maybe he's feeling better, maybe he isn't. If not, at least he's in a place where he *can* , eventually. He's surrounded by people who will help him every step of the way.

"I still don't quite understand," Nighteye says, as the little group enters a cul de sac.

"Bean sprout's taking a self-care day," Nana explains, and Nighteye looks no less befuddled.

The old woman leads them to a house. As they watch, Izuku darts up the steps, slips the note under the door, and comes back. It's over in a matter of seconds. Nana is too far away to hear anything, but she can see the woman weep as she bows repeatedly in gratitude, and then vanishes into thin air. Izuku stays still for a moment more, then moves on.

"On to the next one," Nana says cheerily.

"The next *what*."

"I dunno," she says. "Favor, I guess. Actually no, favor's the wrong word. Favor implies he's expecting it to be repaid. It's more like… a good turn? Community service?" For the dead community, she thinks. Incredible.

Sure enough, they chase the kids back and forth across Musutafu. Another note to deliver. A front door left unlocked. Food bowls to set out for a colony of stray cats. Little things that add up to a full day. It's only when they all swing in the direction of a junkyard that

Izuku's pace slows.

"It's fine, Deku," Uraraka insists. "You already warned us about this kind of stuff before we left, and we don't mind."

"I already helped you pull a very dirty dog out from under a house," Todoroki adds. "This is nothing."

Izuku still hesitates, only for Eraserhead to step in. "This'll be the last one for the day anyway," he says. "Any more and you three will miss curfew."

With a nod, Izuku leads them into the junkyard.

Nana drifts over to the fretful ghost who sent them on this errand in the first place. "Hey, uh, what are you looking for again?"

The ghost startles at her sudden appearance. "My daughter's toy. It's an orange cat with stripes. She left it in the car, after the crash, and now she can't sleep without it."

"Understood." To Nighteye she says, "You heard her. C'mon, it'll go by faster if we help."

She lets Nighteye go his own way, noting how he keeps his distance from Izuku. As far as she knows, he hasn't approached the kid since he first died, much less talked to him. She's trying not to be impatient about it; after all, these things take time.

"Does he do this sort of thing often?" Nighteye asks, as they drift through the junked cars.

"Sort of," Nana replies. "Not often, exactly. But everyone copes in different ways. He says he's been doing it since he was small. It helps him to be helpful. And I can understand that. When things go wrong, it's comforting to remind yourself that you can still do good."

Nighteye makes a thoughtful noise.

"One of the reasons I found what you said so frustrating," she adds, keeping her tone light.

It still lands harshly. "I didn't know the truth," he says, half to himself.

"You didn't ask." Nana sweeps past him to glance over a pile of rubbish. "You drew your own conclusions and ran with them. Like I said, frustrating."

“I know,” he says, frustrated—with himself, not her. “It’s one thing to be told. It’s another to see it for myself.”

She grins at him. “He’s got a lot of love to give. He’s like Toshi that way. Love and sunshine for everyone he meets. His is just a little spookier, that’s all.”

It takes a little while for Nighteye to answer. “Not… everyone,” he murmurs, and perhaps if Nana were listening with living ears, she wouldn’t have heard it. *Not me,* he doesn’t say.

She sends him a sad smile. “Oh, but he could have,” she says. “You were just prickly about letting him.” He winces. “You *were* . Past tense. You can fix that now. People like us, with nothing left to do but wait for the ones we love… all we have now is time. And when Izuku’s around, that’s all we need. He’ll do the rest. You just have to ask.”

“I found it,” Nighteye says, instead of answering. He’s standing by another car, a gray minivan with a shattered windshield and mangled front. The back is mostly intact, aside from cracked windows, through which Nana can see the orange stuffed cat lying between the seats.

“Good,” Nana says. “You should tell him.”

He gives her a pained look, and she laughs, and he sighs before following her advice. Nana wishes, more than anything, that it could be enough to fix the hurt she knows Izuku is feeling. But she knows it can never be that easy.

She hasn’t even seen him cry.

For once, Shouto doesn’t jerk awake in sudden alarm. He isn’t startled or shaken awake; it happens quite naturally, as far as he can tell. One moment he’s asleep, and the next he’s opening his eyes, drowsy but calm. His room comes into focus around him, dark enough that he probably won’t have to get up for hours yet. Izuku isn’t moving or making any noise beside him, which begs the question as to what woke him up.

Shouto shifts carefully, not wanting to disturb him, but it proves pointless when he reaches an angle that he can comfortably look over at Izuku, and finds him awake and staring up at the ceiling.

His first thought is that a nightmare woke Izuku, who made just

enough noise or movement to wake Shouto. But that can't be it, because he's seen Izuku tense and shaken from a recent nightmare, and right now he's neither of those things.

Right now, Izuku just looks tired.

"I just realized something," he says out loud with his voice.

Shouto would be more excited about that if only he were more awake. At the moment, it's taking all his sluggish brainpower just to follow along.

"Aizawa took a hit for me, you know," Izuku goes on. "That's how he got captured. That's why he wasn't there when Overhaul came."

Almost immediately, Shouto is awake. Even in the mire of sleep, it isn't hard to see where Izuku's thoughts are headed.

"Uraraka said you and Togata stopped him," he says.

"Mm." Izuku won't look at him. "Togata. He wasn't there 'til the end." Before Shouto can answer, he says, "I heard from a ghost that Overhaul was far away, in another part of the tunnels. I told him that, and he went."

Shouto says nothing. This is the first he's heard of this part.

"If Aizawa hadn't taken that hit for me, he and Togata would've both been there. Two perfect counters to Overhaul." For a moment Shouto thinks he's about to cry, but Izuku's eyes stay dry, open, and fixed on the ceiling. "But that's not what happened. There was just me."

"And you still took him down," Shouto points out, quietly. "You did what was needed."

Izuku doesn't answer at first, as Shouto presses closer in a helpless attempt at being comforting. At some point it will sink in, just how close his friend came to not coming back. It's not the first time Izuku has almost gotten killed when Shouto wasn't there. If they become the heroes they hope to be, then it won't be the last.

"I didn't take him down," Izuku whispers, as Shouto starts to drift off again. "I couldn't even do that."

"You're not invincible," Shouto murmurs back. "Can't keep blaming yourself every time something goes wrong." He swallows a yawn.

“You’re enough.”

“I don’t feel like enough.”

“Okay. I’ll just keep saying it ‘til you do.”

If Izuku says anything after that, Shouto doesn’t remember.

Objectively, today is a good day.

It’s overcast, of course. It’s well into fall, with winter just around the corner. The air is crisp and fresh from recent rain, and the sky is pale silver instead of the heavy dark gray of rainclouds. It’s cold out, but not too cold that going out is too much work. Perfect sweater weather.

Less objectively, today could be a lot better. It could be a lot worse, but there’s room for improvement. Of course, there’s always room for improvement! But in this case, there’s… a lot of room. Way too much.

More than Mirio knows what to do with.

It’s barely noon and he’s already tired, having cleaned his dorm room twice, scrubbed his bathroom, and neatened up the common room while his classmates were out. He would love nothing more than to be with them, but his homeroom teacher took one look at him this morning and sent him straight back to the dorms, no matter how desperately Mirio claimed to be fine.

He thinks about Sir in the middle of cleaning his bathroom, accidentally scores the scrub brush over his hand, and tells himself that the tears are a pain reflex.

Technically he *is* fine. He’s not injured, he’s not sick, he’s not *anything* , he’s just *sad* . Who takes sick days for being sad?

After he can’t find anything more to do around the dormitories, he goes for a run to prove it to himself. At some point he has a plan for how many laps to run, but then he thinks about Sir again and loses count. By the time he wobbles back to his dorm room on legs that feel like clay, it’s barely lunchtime.

He’s beginning to regret urging Tamaki to go to class instead of keeping him company. He underestimated just how long the day would be without classes to fill it.

When he passes through the common area to the kitchen, he’s struck

by a frustrating combination of hunger and nausea. His stomach is empty, but he's pretty sure he'll be sick if he tries to eat.

(Maybe Sensei was right to make him sit out of classes today.)

He hops in the shower and has a good cry under the spray, and—yeah, Sensei was probably right. Still, crying is soothing, and so are showers, and by the time he gets dry and dressed, he thinks that maybe, just maybe, he could manage eating something.

Mirio spends an inordinate amount of time staring into the fridge, taking in containers and bags of his classmates' leftovers, plus the pot of soup Tamaki made yesterday. He can handle soup, can't he? Tamaki won't mind. In fact, Mirio's pretty sure Tamaki made the soup for him anyway.

He realizes with a jolt that he's left the fridge open too long, and steps back to close it and gather his thoughts.

The door swings shut, and Midoriya Izuku stares at him in its place.

Mirio actually jumps, because he's a human being and human beings jump when they're startled. There are a lot of things that don't make sense about Midoriya, and his total lack of presence is one of them. It's so consistent that it *has* to be quirk-related, and how can something like that coexist with strength that turns concrete into gravel?

"I need to talk to you," Midoriya tells him, while Mirio is in the middle of getting his breath back.

"How did you get in here?" Mirio asks. "The front door is ID card-locked."

"Borrowed Hadou's," Midoriya says. "Can we talk? It's important."

"I… sure." Food can wait. Midoriya's talking again, and he's here instead of in class or in his own dormitory, and if he says it's important then it must be important. "C'mon, my room's on the third floor."

It's also immaculate from this morning's half-desperate cleaning. It looks like a picture in a catalog, only with more posters and personal effects. Midoriya's eyes rake over it, blinking little. He looks like he hasn't slept much.

Mirio hooks his foot around his desk chair to pull it out, then sits on his bed. “So what did you want to talk about?” He purses his lips, unsure of what face he should make. He has a very uncomfortable feeling that Midoriya’s about to do something silly like try to apologize for what happened, as if any of it was his fault, and Mirio wants to nip that in the bud as soon as possible if it’s the case. But Midoriya has spent the last few weeks silent, so the last thing Mirio wants to do is interrupt.

Midoriya ignores the chair and stands in the middle of the room, putting a bit of distance between them. On the outside he looks relaxed, impassive, but who knows what’s going on inside his head.

“I trust you,” Midoriya says bluntly. “You’re honest, and you act loud and over the top all the time but you have more common sense than most of the people I’ve met in my entire life.”

“Er,” says Mirio. “Thanks?”

“So I know when I ask you to keep this a secret, you will,” Midoriya goes on. “Especially after you hear what it is.”

“Of course,” Mirio says automatically.

Midoriya falls silent for a moment, collecting his thoughts, until finally—“Do you know what my quirk is?”

“What?”

“My quirk,” Midoriya repeats. “I can’t remember if I ever told you what it was.”

“Strength enhancement,” Mirio says hesitantly. “I think. And… possibly sense enhancement? There seems to be a lot more to it.”

Midoriya nods. “You said you saw the Sports Festival, right? You saw me. What I did to myself.”

Mirio nods, still uncertain. “It… looked pretty bad. You have better control now than you did back then.”

“That’s because I’ve had it nine months instead of three,” Midoriya says.

“You—what?” Mirio does a few mental calculations. “Your quirk came in last February?” A connection is made. “Wait, that’s entrance exam

season."

Midoriya nods. "I got it the morning of. If you thought the festival was bad, you should've seen what I did to myself then."

Mirio stares, speechless.

"I could lie and tell you that I was just a late bloomer with a freak mutation." Midoriya won't meet Mirio's eyes anymore. "But I'm not. It was given to me. It has two parts: power stockpiling, and passing on at will. It's strong because it's passed through enough hands to make it that strong. It's called One For All." His eyes flicker to Mirio's, only briefly. "...Are you with me so far?"

"Yes," Mirio says, otherwise dumbstruck. Holy shit. Holy *shit* .

"Ten months before I got it, I met All-Might, and I guess I made a good impression," Midoriya says. "Because he decided he wanted me to have his quirk."

Holy *fucking shit.*

"Why—" Mirio pauses to swallow with his dry throat. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because Nighteye wanted it to be you."

Hearing Sir's name, after spending the past few hours trying not to let himself think it, is like having his head forced underwater. "...What?"

"He wanted you to take One For All," Midoriya says. "He thought you were perfect. You have a good quirk, you're strong, you're determined, and you're just—you're good. You're a good person and you'd do great things with it. The only reason why you don't have it is that All-Might ran into me before he had the chance to meet you."

"I…" Mirio chokes out. He's been fighting against his own head all day, forcing down the memories just so they won't drown out everything else in the silence, running himself ragged just to try to stay ahead of them. And now…

He isn't lying. Midoriya wouldn't just lie about something like this. He's not that kind of person, and even if he were, there's nothing to be gained from making up something like this. It's the truth. That's the only way any of this makes sense.

But it *doesn't* make sense, because—

Sir never told him, he never even—

He never—

"Why are you telling me this?" he asks again.

"Because after everything that's happened, I can see where Nighteye was coming from," Midoriya says. "It was supposed to be yours. So now I'm asking you if you want it."

"*What?* "

"I mean, I think it's safe to say you'd be better at it than I am," Midoriya says with a shrug. It's almost convincing, almost enough to hide the trembling, wire-taut tension in his voice. "N-not that it's hard. I've set the bar pretty low. I'm just sorry it took—It took so much for me to realize that. It shouldn't have. I should've figured it out back at Kamino."

The words pull Mirio back up, out from under the icy depths of whatever drowning pit his grief keeps dragging him into. He can breathe again. It shouldn't be this way, it shouldn't take somebody else's pain to clear his head, but sometimes it's easier to help someone else than it is to help himself.

And there's just *so much wrong* with what he just heard that he can't let it go uncorrected.

"This is what you and Sir were arguing about before, wasn't it?" he says once he finds his voice.

Midoriya nods.

"I could tell there was something about you he didn't approve of, and you were challenging him on it," Mirio says. "I just didn't know what it was." At least that much makes sense now; he could never figure out what Sir had against Midoriya, but this… this makes sense, as much as he hates to admit it. Sir was stubborn, even rigid. Maybe that was what happened when you were used to knowing the future; you got used to staying on one path.

He shakes his head. "You never seemed to care about what he thought of you," he says. "I liked that about you. He's—he was intimidating, but you didn't let it shake you." He can almost feel the compliment

slide off of Midoriya, never catching. “What changed?”

Midoriya stares at him like it’s the dumbest question he ever heard. “I got him *killed*, Mirio.”

Mirio isn’t sure what surprises him more, the use of his first name or the cracks spreading through Midoriya’s cold shell of nonchalance.

“I walked him into a trap, and I slowed down *everyone* who could have helped,” Midoriya continues, almost viciously. “Even Eri. She could have saved him, but she didn’t because she had to save *me* instead.” His voice breaks, but he doesn’t stop. “And it made me realize that maybe I’m not the right person after all. Maybe All-Might was wrong about me. Maybe Nighteye was right the first time, and I was just too stubborn and arrogant to admit it.”

He stops to flinch, as if someone’s shouting in his ear.

“I just—” He stops again, and doesn’t continue until his voice is just a little bit steadier. “I just had this moment of clarity—”

“No you didn’t,” Mirio says.

Midoriya stares at him, startled into momentary silence, and Mirio happily presses into it. He’s heard enough.

“You’ve been confident in your own abilities this entire time.” Mirio ignores the way Midoriya’s hands curl into fists. “And you should be. You’ve been getting things done with or without that quirk, wherever it came from. You saved Eri the day you met her. You protected her when the League tried to take her back.”

“*You* did,” Midoriya says, quiet and tense. “If it had just been me, they would’ve taken her.”

“And if you hadn’t been there to slow them down, it wouldn’t have mattered if I got there or not.”

“Anyone can *slow a villain down*—”

“Maybe so,” Mirio says. “Maybe others could do the things you’ve done, maybe they couldn’t. That doesn’t matter. *You* were the one who was there. *You* were the one who did them.” Midoriya opens his mouth to argue, but falters when Mirio stands up. “So not everything went the way you wanted this time. You made mistakes and there were consequences. And now you think the rest of it doesn’t matter

anymore?"

Midoriya flinches again.

"That's not clarity," Mirio says. "That's *doubt* . Don't get them confused."

He knows it's coming. He sees it in the sheen in Midoriya's eyes, hears it in the hitching breath that breaks the silence that follows. In a matter of seconds, whatever dam Midoriya built up against it breaks down, and his watery eyes and uneven breathing turn into soft crying.

In two steps he closes the distance between them and pulls Midoriya into a hug. The kid stiffens up for a split second, then rocks into him with a hoarse, muffled wail.

"*I'm sorry.*"

"You don't have anything to be sorry for."

Midoriya shakes his head furiously.

"If anything, *I* should be the sorry one," Mirio says, and his voice wobbles when his throat almost squeezes itself shut. "I should've been there to help you. You should never have had to face that alone."

"I wasn't," Midoriya sobs. "I wasn't alone, but it didn't even matter. I *tried*. I tried so hard, but I couldn't—"

"Of course you did. I know that." Mirio gives him a pat. "I haven't said thank you yet, so I'm saying it now. *Thank you,* Deku."

"It wasn't enough. I wasn't enough."

"Hey." Mirio forces himself to let go, pushes Midoriya gently back so they're looking each other in the eye. "Don't forget—Sir was there with you. And he wasn't enough, either. He wasn't—he wasn't strong enough to save himself, either. All the other pro heroes in this mission weren't even strong enough to be there to help. And I wasn't fast enough to reach you until it was too late to save him." He squeezes Midoriya's shoulders, forcing him to look at him instead of the floor. "This is *not* all on you. Do you understand? And you're doing *no one* any favors by trying to give up now." He levels a steady glare through his own tears. "I won't let you give up on yourself."

Midoriya holds his gaze for a few moments before shutting his eyes and taking a deep, shaky breath. When he's sure the kid isn't about to keel over, Mirio lets go. Midoriya takes a few more breaths, and the tears finally subside.

"Feels a little better, doesn't it?" Mirio says, wiping his own eyes.

"A little," Midoriya admits. "Sorry about that."

"Don't be sorry. In fact, new rule: you're not allowed to apologize for anything for the rest of the day. I *mean* it," he adds, when he sees Midoriya wince. "I don't blame you for what happened. It never even crossed my mind to blame you. And I know that—" His voice catches. "I know he'd feel the same. I know you didn't get along, but he wouldn't blame you for this, either."

"I know," Midoriya says, with a raspy cough that almost sounds like a wretched laugh. "I… I know that." He swipes his hand over his eyes. "It's just… it's hard to…"

His voice trails off. Tired, reddened eyes meet Mirio's again, wary and considering. Mirio feels like he's being sized up for something, and his smile fades with confusion and worry..

At last, Midoriya seems to come to a silent decision, and his eyes flicker away again.

"It's hard to believe that sometimes," he says. "Even when he says it to my face."

Not for the first time, Mirio's mind goes momentarily blank. He hears the words, even understands them individually. Taken together, they stop making sense.

"What?"

Midoriya's eyes slide shut. "It's been hard, just trying to look him in the eye. He's been patient, though. When they ask him to give me space, he listens. I appreciate that."

"Midoriya, what are you talking about?" Mirio can't describe how those words make him feel, only that it's some flavor of uncomfortable.

Green eyes open again. "Do you remember when you sparred with my class, and you asked me afterward how I predicted you?"

“Yes…?”

“I didn’t predict shit.” Midoriya braces himself. “I’ve only had One For All since last February, but I’ve been talking to the dead since I was little.”

For some reason, Mirio’s first instinct is to laugh. Not his usual full-throated belly laugh, but one of those thin, warbly noises he only makes when he’s nervous or desperate to fill the silence. He just manages to cut it off before it leaves his throat, and what emerges instead is, “You. What?”

Midoriya gives him another one of his strange, piercing looks, as if he’s weighing Mirio against something else. “I can leave now, if you want,” he says. “Let it sink in, what that all means. If you need. If you don’t believe me yet. It’s a lot, I know. Or…”

“Or?” Mirio squeaks out.

“He wants to talk to you,” Izuku says. “There are things he didn’t get to say before. Only if you’re ready. He can wait, if you’re not.”

For once in his life, Mirio genuinely doesn’t know what to say. He can only stare at him, pleadingly—for what? What does he want? He doesn’t even know what he wants, just that he does.

Midoriya tilts his head to the side, as if he can read Mirio’s thoughts better at a different angle. “For the record,” he says, “even if you said yes to me before, I would’ve done this before I gave it to you.” He activates his quirk—One For All—and reaches out to grasp something that Mirio can’t see. There’s a surge of green lightning, and then—

As shocked as Mirio is to see him, Sir looks even more surprised to be seen. He blinks—only his eyes aren’t there anymore, they’re white and empty but other than that—

“This’ll last about twenty minutes,” Midoriya says. “If you need more time than that, come get me.” With that, he leaves. Mirio barely notices.

It’s not like it was before—*Sir* isn’t like he was before. His eyes are gone, and he’s pale and tired-looking. He looks like a man who’s just died but is still somehow awake.

“I’m sorry it took so long to get back to you,” Sir Nighteye says, awkward and unsure in a way that Mirio has never seen him before.

“They said it was better to give you some time. And I’ll admit, this has taken some getting used to for me, as well.”

Mirio stares.

“Too much?” Nighteye asks. “I did say I wanted to see what you would become with my own eyes. I meant it.”

Mirio chokes out something that is either a laugh or a sob or both, as he launches himself forward and confirms that his mentor really is solid and real and *here* .

Chapter End Notes

> CW: Brief strangling, description of past violent death, hospital setting, canonical character death (Nighteye), mention of temporary death in previous chapter, grief and self-blame.

Chapter 60

Chapter Summary

In which conversations are had, and some doors are closed, and others are opened.

Chapter Notes

Fanart tag

TV Tropes page

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuku flops down on the common room couch, almost landing in Shouto's lap. He's tired, mentally and physically, and he didn't even attend all his classes today. Aizawa-sensei stopped him halfway through training and sent him back to the dorms for reasons that Izuku would rather not think about right now. He's had quite enough of feeling things too deeply for today.

"Where'd you go?" Shouto asks, scooting over so that he can sit more comfortably without Shouto's knee jabbing into his side.

"Third year dorms," Izuku answers. "How was class?"

"Fine. Are you all right?"

"I am now," Izuku says. "Kind of. I mean, I'm better than I was when I left." He'd been dissociating pretty hard when he left, and when he finally came out of it, he'd been standing in front of the dorm building with Hadou's borrowed key card. And after that... "I, uh. Worked some stuff out."

"Oh. Good." Shouto considers him for a moment, as if debating whether to ask what kind of stuff was worked out. "Do you… want to talk about it?"

"Not with you." He's still working out the tangle in his own head at the moment; the last thing he wants to do is try to wrestle it into coherent words. He looks over just in time to see Shouto's crestfallen face, and realizes belatedly how that sounded. "Sorry, I didn't mean it like that. I mean… this isn't really a friends and loved ones kind of problem."

Shouto frowns at him. “What kind of problem is it?”

Izuku’s tongue catches in his mouth, and for a moment he considers not telling him. There’s no real reason why he shouldn’t. None of their classmates are close enough to hear, and it’s *Shouto*. He can tell Shouto anything. But… it’s *embarrassing*. He knows it isn’t bad, he knows he needs it, he knows plenty of heroes need it, but that doesn’t stop his stomach from shriveling up at the thought of admitting it out loud.

But…

“It’s… it’s a, uh.” Izuku swallows hard. “So. Here’s the thing. There’s been a lot happening, right?”

Shouto stares at him.

“To me, specifically. A lot.” Izuku shifts to sit crosslegged, their knees bumping. He speaks quietly and hopes that Shouji and Jirou aren’t eavesdropping. “There’s the dead people thing, and that’s been around for… a long time. And then there’s everything else this year. Kamino, and what happened at my internship…” His voice trails off.

Shouto keeps watching him carefully, as if checking to see if he’s hiding an injury. “Has something changed?” he asks.

“Sort of. Not a bad change, though,” he says quickly. “It’s just… see, Aizawa-sensei knows about all of it, and he decided that it’d be best if I… go to therapy.”

Shouto blinks, realization dawning in his eyes. “Oh,” he says, and lets out a short breath. “Oh. *Good* .”

“Yeah, good,” Izuku says, swallowing a sigh of relief. “I-I mean, that’s what Aizawa-sensei says. It’ll be good for me.”

“It should be, if you find the right therapist,” Shouto says, nodding. “Make sure you do. The first one isn’t always the best.”

Izuku stares at him.

Shouto shrugs. “That’s what my mother says. She went through two of them before she found one that really helped.”

“Oh.”

“I don’t think *he* cared,” Shouto says with a touch of bitterness. “He

just wanted to keep her from doing what she did again, and to send her away before the media found out. But it helped her to talk to people who knew how to help her. She's been able to heal that way. Didn't hurt to be away from him, too."

"Aizawa-sensei said something like that," Izuku says cautiously. "Not about your mom, of course. But he says a lot of pro heroes do it, and it's an unofficial requirement for underground heroes."

Shouto hums thoughtfully. "Makes sense. Are you nervous?"

"Sort of." Izuku pauses. "Does your mom, um… say anything else about it?"

"Not a lot. It's private. I think that's the point." Shouto shoots him an encouraging look. "But it helps, that's the main thing she says. It helps and you shouldn't be ashamed, no matter what others think."

Izuku nods. The snarl of thoughts in his head is set aside for now, and the ones that drift in to replace it are clearer. "What do *you* think?" he asks.

"I think it'll help you, too," Shouto says.

"What about you?"

Shouto's brow wrinkles in confusion. "What about me?"

"I mean…" Izuku hesitates, gives himself one last chance to bail before he oversteps, and goes for it. "Have you ever considered it? That it might help you?"

He doesn't get an answer right away. He's not sure whether Shouto's silence means he has or hasn't thought about it before.

"It's just," Izuku continues before he can stop himself. "Your mom's not the only one he hurt, so…"

"He hasn't hurt me in a while," Shouto says shortly. "I haven't trained with him since we started living here."

"Oh hey, are we talking about Endeavor?" Hino pokes his head through the door—literally through it. "Did you know he's been blowing up the kid's phone lately? He's been left on read for weeks, but he won't take the hint."

As if on cue, Shouto's phone chimes. He checks it, scowls, and shoves

it under his pillow.

“Was that—?”

“It’s not important,” Shouto says. “He’s just texting me, that’s nothing compared to everything else he’s done. It’s nothing compared to everything that’s happened to *you* .”

“It’s not a contest,” Izuku says dryly.

Shouto doesn’t answer.

“It’s just…” Izuku finds himself running his finger along the scars on his hand, tracing the lines from one end to the other. “When we first met, you weren’t exactly in a good place. You’re not in that place anymore, you’re—I think you’re—I *hope* you’re somewhere better, it feels like you are, but…”

“I am,” Shouto says. “Thanks to you.”

Izuku smiles weakly at him. “I’m glad I could help,” he says. “But I’m not that good.”

Shouto doesn’t agree out loud. But he does look thoughtful.

Coming here isn’t solely for Izuku’s own benefit. Obviously this is good for him and he has to do it for his own sake, but.

He’s also holding Eri’s hand as they cross the parking lot with Aizawa-sensei. She huddles close, and he won’t be able to stay with her the whole time, but he’s with her now, and it’s enough to get her in the door. Rei hovers on the other side of her, unseen, but Eri knows she’s there. Izuku made sure to tell her; it seems to comfort her.

Jihi Hospital looks no different from any other hospital that Izuku has ever seen. That’s the way it should be, heaven forbid they advertise it as a tempting target, but part of him feels that a hospital that caters almost exclusively to pro heroes and their families should at least look the part. Extra patrols, more security, something like that.

He mentions as much to Aizawa, who snorts. “Who says there aren't any?” He doesn’t elaborate.

Eri’s hand trembles in Izuku's as Aizawa leads them inside to the lobby, and Izuku draws her close while Aizawa speaks with the receptionist. She's not any less nervous than she was when she first got

in the car.

“Are you sure you can’t stay with me?” she whispers, when Aizawa leaves the front desk to lead them down the first hallway. They’ll be in the same wing but different rooms. They might not even finish at the same time.

Izuku’s heart twists painfully. The first thing she ever said to him was a plea for him to stay; breaking that now feels wrong. “Aizawa will be with you,” he reminds her. “If you don’t feel good talking to the doctor, you can tell him, and he’ll take you to the room I’m in so you can wait for me.” She looks uncertain, which is better than terrified. “You know, Rei could stay with you again. You wouldn’t be able to see her, but she’d be with you. Would that make it better?”

Eri thinks this over, apparently very deeply, before finally shaking her head. “I have Aizawa-san,” she says softly. “If I have Rei too, then you won’t have anyone.”

Not entirely true; hospitals are never totally free of ghosts. But they’re all strangers to him, so Eri still has a point. “All right,” he says. “If you’re sure.”

She nods, her mouth tight and determined. It’s the same look she had when she tried to give herself up to Compress, and when she unleashed her power on Chisaki.

“You know something, Eri?” he says. “You’re one of the bravest people I’ve ever met.” She stares at him, shocked and confused, and he just smiles. “Remember, this is meant to help you. If it doesn’t, then you don’t have to stay. All you have to do is try.”

Eri nods and doesn’t protest again. She also doesn’t let go of his hand until the very last minute, when they absolutely have to.

“If your session finishes first, just wait outside,” Aizawa tells him when they're all called in. “Don’t wander off.”

It goes… not badly. The bar was already low: all Izuku wanted to do was tell her about his quirk without being laughed out of her office or squinted at and questioned about where he thought these delusions might be coming from. Dr. Kanayama does none of those things. She listens, she nods along like it’s the most perfectly sane thing in the world, and only barely smiles when Izuku stumbles over his disbelief.

("It isn't that outrageous," she says matter-of-factly. "If a man can involuntarily warp into various alternate dimensions, then there's no reason why you shouldn't be communicating with the dead. I am not a quirk counselor, and it is not my job to question your abilities. I'm here to give you the tools your need to sort it out how *you* see best.")

So it goes well. So well, in fact, that it ends a little early with Izuku running out of mental energy and things to say to her. He's tired, but comfortably so. He feels helped.

He does make an earnest attempt to stay close to the other door; he really does. But he also *really* needs to go to the bathroom, and finding it hardly qualifies as "wandering off", right? Aizawa can't possibly get mad at him for using the facilities.

It's just, he loses track of the route and Rei wanders off to bother some of the ghosts in the hospital, and he gets turned around on the way back. He's furiously embarrassed by the time he realizes he doesn't know how to get back, because of all the possible reasons to disobey Aizawa, this is definitely the dumbest.

Grumbling to himself, he glances around for Rei, or even a ghost that he doesn't know, because anyone who haunts this place probably knows their way around. Soon enough, a pale figure slips around a corner, looking around furtively, and Izuku opens his mouth to call out to them.

A familiar face turns to him, and Hino freezes where he stands.

Izuku stares at him. "What are you—?"

"*Shit.* " Immediately Hino's shoving at him. "Go, go, you need to get out of here, right now." He's urgent but not scared, which only leaves Izuku confused as he stumbles to obey. There's probably no danger, but then why…?

"Don't freak out," Hino hisses by his ear, as a second figure steps out from around the same corner.

Unlike Hino, this one is alive. Like Hino, he is also familiar, in spite of the medical mask covering the worst of the scars. There's no mistaking those eyes.

Izuku tenses as he's grabbed and pulled out of the main hallway. His back hits the wall, not hard enough to hurt, but enough to jolt his hold of One For All. Dabi looms over him, glaring over the edge of the

mask. He looks different when he's dressed in baggy street clothes, his hair red and reeking of fresh dye. Not different enough for Izuku to forget being punched and kicked on a warehouse floor, but different enough that the average civilian wouldn't recognize him.

Izuku glares up at him, tense but not terrified. Dabi isn't like Toga, or like Compress. He doesn't dig into any old traumas, and he's never shown much interest in Izuku himself beyond his obligations as a member of the League. But he's also an unknown. Izuku doesn't know what he wants, or why.

Then again, he can guess.

"Don't yell," Dabi growls at him. He doesn't follow it up with a threat, but seeing as they're standing in a hospital, he doesn't really need to. "No point. For once, I'm not here to start anything."

"What do you want?" Izuku asks, proud of himself for keeping his voice steady. Maybe therapy really does help with regulating his emotions. "What are you doing here?"

After a moment, Dabi lets go and steps back, shoving his hands in his jacket pockets. Between the clothes and the slouch, he almost looks like a normal twenty-something. It's surreal.

"Like *you* need to ask me that," the villain says, almost sullen. "What're you so pissy about? I'm just following your advice." Izuku's confusion must show on his face, because Dabi makes a scornful noise. "What, you don't know where you are right now?"

"Jihi Hospital?" Izuku almost forgets to be suspicious, because if he didn't know better, he'd think they were having a civilized conversation.

"Really? That's all you got?" Dabi glares at him. "Guess it didn't mean much that Shigaraki thought you were smart."

Izuku's eyes flicker toward Hino. The ghost hovers nearby, looking anxiously from one of them to the other. When he catches Izuku looking, he winces. "My sister's here," he says. "Fifth floor. He really isn't doing anything; I've been watching."

The confusion lasts a split second longer before Izuku remembers the last time he was face to face with Dabi. He sucks in a breath. "You're visiting your mother," he realizes. "I didn't know she was here."

“Yeah, you and the rest of the country,” Dabi spits.

“Seems like a risk,” Izuku says cautiously. Dabi rolls his eyes. “For Endeavor, I mean. Putting his dirty secret in a hospital that’s crawling with other heroes.”

Dabi’s eyes narrow. “Nobody asks about the permanent patients,” he says. “Secure hospital, secure records. Not that it’s any of your business.”

“Since we’re talking about how secure this place is,” Izuku says, “tell me why I shouldn’t start yelling to the nearest pros that there's a League member here.”

“Uhh, actually—” Hino begins.

“Because we’re in a hospital, and I’m a villain,” Dabi says, raising an eyebrow.

“A hospital with your mom in it,” Izuku says.

Dabi actually growls at him. “Fine. Because I'm not in the League anymore.”

“...What?”

“Do you know why?” Dabi asks. “Because there *is* no League. The shadow leader and the brains are dead. Shigaraki’s shithouse-rat crazy. The rest are being picked off one by one—Magne’s dead, and Compress and Toga are headed to prison. There was one thing I wanted out of that mess, and I can tell I’m not getting it. Not from Shigaraki.”

“You don’t have to be in the League to be a villain,” Izuku retorts.

Dabi’s eyes glint. “*Dabi’s* a villain,” he says. “Good thing no one knows who Dabi is, hm? No one but you.” He steps closer again. “So, we’re at an impasse. Like you said, this place is crawling with heroes, so I probably don’t have time to cook your brain and get out before this places slams into emergency mode. And even if I did, apparently my brother’s attached to you.” Izuku bristles. “What? Mom says he talks about you. Also, hurt him and I’ll boil the fluids in your eyeballs.”

Izuku’s temper flares. “Like *you* have any right to talk,” he snarls back.

“Shit, touched a nerve.” Dabi sounds amused. “Good. Did you tell him

about me?”

“I should,” Izuku snaps.

“You can, if you like. It won’t matter now.” Dabi leans against the wall. “I’ll be laying low for a while. There are things I need to take care of—as Touya, not Dabi. In fact, I could use your help.”

“You’re asking me for a favor now?” Izuku asks dryly.

“You might like it,” Dabi says. “All you have to do is pass along a message to Endeavor when you get the chance. Tell him all about me. Tell him I’m watching. If he doesn’t believe you, remind him of what happened on March 8th when I was twelve.”

“What for?”

“Because I’m watching, and Dabi can always come back if I don’t like what I see.” Dabi’s eyes narrow like he’s smiling. “If he hurts Mother again. If he hurts Shouto. How would his new adoring fans react if they knew he raised a villain? He's no All-Might. His pillar's made of toothpicks, and it's not gonna take much to crack it.”

Izuku blinks.

“Look me in the eye and tell me he doesn’t deserve it,” Dabi says coldly. “Tell me it’s not a small price to pay for everything he’s done.”

"It's the fallout I'd be worried about," Izuku shoots back. "Losing another number one hero right after All-Might? Like the world needs more chaos."

In a flash, Dabi is looming over him again, crowding him back against the wall. "I'd burn the world on a spit if it meant that bastard couldn't touch my family again," he snarls. "Keep that in mind. You get in the way, I'll burn you too. Whether Shouto forgives me for it or not."

"I'll keep that in mind," Izuku says coldly.

Dabi holds his glare for a few more seconds before, at last, he steps away. “Well, so long,” he says. “And who knows? If we’re both lucky, we might never see each other again. Or if we do, you’ll be calling me Touya.”

With that, he’s gone. Izuku watches him go, fists clenched, and doesn’t shout for the nearest heroes. He doesn’t raise any alarms.

He probably should.

But he doesn't.

"Thank you," Hino breathes.

"There's only one reason I didn't try to stop him," Izuku says. "Of all the League members, Dabi was one of the only ones who never had ghosts."

"I'll tell you if that changes," Hino says grimly.

Izuku looks at him, surprised. It's rare to hear him so serious.

"I'll keep an eye on him," the ghost assures him. "I don't have to worry about Shouto; you have him handled. But Touya…"

"Thank you," Izuku says.

"Are you going to do what he says?" Hino asks. "'Cause I'm pretty sure that'd be blackmail. Not that Endeavor doesn't deserve it and more, but…"

"I'm not going to blackmail him," Izuku says calmly. Innocently. "I'm going to tell him who Dabi is, because as the number one hero, he should know. And I might remind him about what that means for him, because he should know that too. If he wants to take 'blackmail' from that, then that's on him, not me."

Shouto too, he thinks. Shouto deserves to know. Shouto deserves a say in what to do about it.

Rei finds him again shortly after that, and Izuku finds his way back just in time to see Aizawa stepping out with Eri at his heels, followed by a woman that Izuku assumes to be the child therapist assigned to her. He assumes that until another man follows her out, which leaves him wondering why there were two of them.

Aizawa catches sight of him walking back instead of waiting outside, and raises an eyebrow.

"I was in the bathroom," Izuku says. The encounter with Dabi lingers in the back of his throat, and he weighs the pros and cons of speaking up before putting it in the "ask Shouto" file. Explaining the situation with Dabi means explaining the situation with Shouto and Endeavor.

Aizawa nods at him, then steps away to speak with the woman. Eri

clings to his leg and follows, glancing back at Izuku as if weighing her options before deciding to stay put for now. Izuku can't help but smile.

"You must be Deku."

Izuku turns to the man, surprised but not alarmed. He's not expecting to be addressed, but the man has a calming presence that keeps Izuku from getting uncomfortable over it. His eyes are a strange shade of yellow, and there's a nick through his eyebrow, but his smile is soft and pleasant as he dips in a little bow of greeting. "Excuse my forwardness. But Eri-chan talked a lot about you during her session with Dr. Watanabe. She trusts you very much."

"Oh," Izuku says, still puzzled. He shoots a look at Rei, just for someone to share his confusion with, only to find her staring at the man with a blank look on her face. She doesn't even notice him looking over. "Er, sorry, but Dr. Watanabe is Eri's therapist, right?"

"That's right," the man says. "I'm a quirk counselor myself, but Watanabe and I often work together. Unique and high-risk quirks are my specialty, so she called me in to help with Eri-chan."

"Oh." Confusion neutralized, Izuku shifts into a more comfortable stance. The only odd thing left about the man isn't even his fault; it's the fact that Rei hasn't started poking at him yet. "Yeah, Eri's quirk is… something."

"So is Eri-chan herself." The man casts a soft look in her direction. "She has a ways to go, but she's survived a lot for a little girl her age." He sighs a little. "She's so small, though. My Hitomi's about that age."

"I see." It takes a moment for Izuku to register it. "Wait, sorry, who?"

"My daughter Hitomi," the man says with a crooked grin. "She's about six now. Old enough for me to really start worrying. But it feels better knowing there are heroes like you ready to walk the streets."

Izuku's heart quickens, and it shouldn't, because it's just a name. There are hundreds of girls with that name, so why—? "Sorry, what did you say your name was?"

"Ah." He shakes his head, embarrassed. "Forgive me, my mind's all over the place. I'm Morigawa Shizuo."

He can feel the air around Rei vibrate. Her hair twists and curls like

tangled snakes. She doesn't take her eyes off of the man in front of them.

"Morigawa Hitomi," Izuku whispers.

"Sorry?"

"N-nothing," Izuku says. "Just… it's a nice name, that's all."

Morigawa Shizuo's face softens. For a moment, his eyes are distant. Yellow eyes, Izuku realizes. Yellow eyes and black hair.

"My older sister's name," he says. "Or at least it was. Maybe she has a different one now."

"Oh?" Izuku answers. His own voice sounds very far away.

"Yes." Morigawa purses his lips, as if wondering whether or not to continue. "She had a quirk that was simple, in its own right. Amplifying emotions. It was my opposite, in fact; I calm them. And the home that we grew up in was… not the best, for a quirk like hers. Our parents made a certain decision when I was far too young to do anything about it, and didn't keep the paperwork afterward." He clears his throat. "So, Eri hits close to home for me."

Behind his calm face, Izuku is *reeling* .

Out loud, he says, "You still remember her? Your sister?"

"Of course." Morigawa smiles ruefully. "I think about her all the time. That's why I'm here, you know. Helping children manage difficult quirks, so fewer parents make the same decision as mine, or Eri's mother for that matter."

"Oh," Izuku says faintly.

"I don't know where she is now," Morigawa says. "Perhaps I'll never know. But I hope she found her way to people who love her."

Izuku can't speak through the tightness in his throat, so he nods instead.

"Well, Eri's in good hands, both here and with you," Morigawa says. "Have a good day, Deku-kun. I hope to see you and Eri-chan again soon."

He turns to leave, feeling nothing when Rei's hand catches at his

sleeve and passes through it. She keeps her hand out as he walks away, reaching but not following.

"Rei?" he murmurs. "Rei, is that...?"

Her lips barely move, but her whisper reaches Izuku's ears.

"*He's so big now.*"

It's about time for them to leave, and Eri brightens at Izuku's approach. "Deku-san!" Her face falls when she looks at him. "Deku-san? Are you crying?"

Oh. So he is.

"It's fine," he tells her. "I think I just found out something happy."

It is happy, isn't it? It's a happy thing, that someone remembers.

That someone cared about Morigawa Hitomi.

"Let's talk," he says, and Nighteye flickers the way most ghosts do when they're startled.

"Oh," Nighteye says, surprised and relieved and hopeful and worried all at once.

From that point on, Izuku's jog becomes a walk, not that he minds much. The UA campus is very nice, especially once you hit the surrounding trees. It's like an arboretum all the way down the hill, which makes for better jogging scenery than a treadmill in a gym. The perfect place to wander along the paths and talk to thin air.

"Have you been okay?" he asks.

"As well as can be expected," Nighteye answers, still with an air of faint surprise. "The others have been… welcoming. Shimura and Ingenium especially."

"Yeah, they're pretty great." Izuku grins, falling silent as he considers what to say. He hasn't talked to Nighteye much since... since the hospital really, and he knows that he should. He's tired of being at odds with him, and he's tired of feeling the remains of their conflict hanging over his head along with everything that came out of Nighteye's death. It's not that he doesn't blame himself for what happened anymore; he sort of does, and he sort of always will. There's

a part of him that keeps running through every detail of the fight, pointing out every little mistake he could have fixed, and maybe no amount of pep talks and therapy will make it go away forever.

“Thank you,” Nighteye says, quiet but emphatic. “For what you did for Mirio and me. That was kind of you.”

Izuku makes a noncommittal noise. He doesn’t want to talk about what happened with Mirio, mostly because of what happened *before* he brought Nighteye into it. He hasn’t even told All-Might about what he offered to do, and he would be perfectly happy pretending that it never happened.

“Would you really have given One For All to Mirio, if he’d said yes?” Nighteye asks.

“At that point, probably,” Izuku admits. “And I definitely would have regretted it. It was stupid, and I’m glad he had the common sense to tell me I was an idiot.”

“He told you no such thing,” Nighteye informs him. “You’re not an idiot. You’re a sixteen-year-old boy and you’d just experienced something terrible. You panicked and tried to over-correct. It happens.”

Izuku tenses, if only because he’s not used to Nighteye trying to be comforting. It’s not bad, just odd and unfamiliar. “My therapist said something like that,” he admits, forcing himself loose again.

“Well, good,” Nighteye grumbles a little. “It’s long overdue that you had one, in my opinion.”

“I still have a long way to go,” Izuku admits. “There’s… a lot to get through.”

“You have a lot of healing and growing to do ,” Nighteye says. “I may have acted the fool, but even I could see that before." He pauses. "Hopefully the first lesson you learn is how to value your own safety.”

“Anything’s possible,” Izuku says with a shrug.

He doesn’t mean much of anything by it, but Nighteye turns to consider him for a moment. He’s almost smiling, and Izuku can count the number of times Nighteye has smiled at him on one hand. “Yes,” Nighteye remarks, almost talking to himself. “I’m coming to realize that, with you.”

And that's almost a compliment, which is a step further than almost a smile. Izuku looks away, hoping his embarrassment doesn't show on his face.

(Regret, too, because if he were really capable of impossible things, then Nighteye would still be alive—)

"I'm not just saying that," Nighteye says. "You are *impossible*, and not just because you're Eraserhead's 'problem child'. Nothing about you is probable or likely. After six years of playing things safe, you can imagine my frustration."

"I didn't have to," Izuku says dryly. It's a low blow, enough to make Nighteye flicker and wince, but that doesn't make it any less true.

"I suppose not," Nighteye admits, subdued. "And I am sorry. I know that I've said it before, but it's worth repeating. Most of my frustrations had nothing to do with you, but you bore them anyway. And now…" He hesitates. "Now I have a chance to right my wrongs, and I wouldn't if it weren't for you."

"It's what I do," Izuku says with a shrug. "You're not special."

"No," Nighteye agrees. "No, you'd do this for any spirit who asked, wouldn't you?"

"I mean, within reason," Izuku answers. "I do have to sleep sometimes. But I do my best."

Nighteye shakes his head wonderingly. "A while ago I compared this power of yours to autopsy, gathering information from the dead to bring them justice. But here you are, soothing restless spirits, putting souls to rest like a psychopomp. It's remarkable." He catches his breath, such that he has breath anymore. "I'm going to spend the rest of whatever this is kicking myself for not seeing it sooner."

Better late than never, Izuku thinks. And the people around him can usually afford to be later than most.

He also thinks, *Psychopomp.* He's never thought of a proper name for his quirk before, but he sort of likes the sound of that.

"And if that's not enough, you had to go and twist the future," Nighteye goes on. "You did, by the way. I saw Chisaki's future play out. Your death, his escape from the tunnels. And none of it happened the way I saw it."

“I have a theory about that, actually,” Izuku says. Nighteye falls silent, curious. “More like a hypothesis, and I don’t really have a way to test it. But it’s interesting to think about."

“What do you mean?” Nighteye asks.

“Your quirk has never made sense to me,” Izuku says. “The way All-Might described it, anyway. You use your quirk, look into someone’s future, and… what? That’s it? It can’t change? There's only ever one option? It can’t work that way. The world can’t work that way. If the future is just one path and one possibility for every choice then what about probability? What about the quirks that affect them?”

Nighteye doesn’t answer, either because he’s listening too closely or because he doesn’t have one. Izuku doesn’t think there is one.

“You used your quirk on Chisaki,” he goes on. “That’s when you saw the things you did. When did it start going off the rails?”

“When… he killed you,” Nighteye says. “You died differently, in my vision. And he met no resistance, just took Eri and left the tunnels. I assumed that my quirk didn’t account for your ability to circumvent death itself.”

“Could be that,” Izuku says. “Or it could have been what happened right before that. Did you see it?” He smiles. “Did you see when Eri used her quirk on him, and turned him all the way back to before he’d taken Trigger? Before you used your quirk on him?”

Nighteye stops. Izuku stops too.

“What if your quirk wasn’t just about showing you the future?” he asks. “What if it let you pick a path, too?”

Nighteye is gaping at him as the full weight of what Izuku is suggesting descends upon him.

“I don’t think I twisted the future to save Eri,” he says. “I think, in that moment, she saved herself.”

“But if that’s the case, then… everything terrible that I’ve ever seen was my own doing,” Nighteye whispers. “Midoriya—if that’s true, then if Toshinori still dies, it could be *my* fault. It would mean that I doomed him.”

“Maybe. Maybe I’m wrong. Honestly, I’m almost hoping I’m not.”

“How can you say that?” Nighteye demands.

“Because it's just a quirk,” Izuku says. “I know about quirks and how they function. I know they have limits. If saving All-Might means fighting against some cosmic destiny, well, I don’t know how to do that. I don’t know how to fight against fate or destiny. I don’t know how to fight against the universe.” He looks sidelong at Nighteye. “But I think I could take you.”

Nighteye chokes out a laugh.

It doesn’t happen the way it did the first time. A city park is not a crowded mall. Fewer people, fewer risks other than himself. He isn’t caught off guard. He sees it coming long before it happens. A not-insignificant part of him almost wants it to happen. After all, it’s not as if he’d be facing it alone.

He’s never alone.

He’s sitting on a park bench, with an off-campus pass in his coat pocket and a bag of groceries hanging in his hands, breathing clouds of mist into the chilly air. He used to do this when he was tiny, pretending he could breathe fire just for fun. He sniffles, wrinkling his nose against the cold. The bench creaks as someone sits beside him.

“Hello, Shigaraki,” says Izuku.

The villain hisses beside him. “You knew I was coming.” His voice is a low, grating rasp. “Why didn’t you run and get help?”

“Same reason you’re here,” Izuku replies. “Thought it’d be nice to talk.”

He shoots a glance at Shigaraki again. For a villain with such a menacing reputation, he doesn’t have a lot of ghosts. It’s almost as if they avoid him. Izuku has to wonder if any ghosts still exist on earth that truly know him—that knew Shimura Tenko before he was Shigaraki Tomura.

“So how’ve you been?” Izuku asks. “I’ve been good, I guess. Therapy helps a lot. You should try it.”

Shigaraki snarls quietly. “Everyone’s gone.”

“Ah.”

“First Magne got herself killed. Then you shits took Compress and Toga. Don’t know where the hell Dabi went. Spinner and Twice still hang around, but I know it won’t be long. I *know* it.”

“Sounds lonely,” Izuku says.

“I can start over,” Shigaraki says simply. “Build up a new league. Claw my way back to the top. You think I can’t?”

“I think a lot of things about you,” Izuku admits.

“Yeah? Like what?”

“I think something terrible happened to you,” Izuku replies. “I don’t know what. I haven’t met anyone who knows.”

Shigaraki coils up like a spring-loaded snake, tense and angry. “What’s it to you?”

“I’ll find out eventually,” Izuku tells him. “I want to know before I figure out what to do. What to fix, if it can be fixed.”

The villain goes quiet, though his coiled-spring spine doesn’t relax.

“It can’t,” he says, almost uncharacteristically quiet.

“Won’t know that until I try,” Izuku says.

Shigaraki rounds on him, his ravaged face twisted in a menacing scowl. “What, you think you can sweet-talk me? Bat your little eyes and turn me good?” He bares his teeth. “Don’t make me laugh. You can’t… *speech* me into stopping. Sensei made me new. Whatever I was before then—that’s *dead* .”

Izuku laughs. “Maybe I have a chance then,” he says. “I’ve spent my whole life helping people who were past saving.”

“I could kill you first. I could kill you right now.”

“I guess you have a point,” Izuku admits. “There’s nothing I can do if you don’t want to listen.” Something settles inside of him. “And I can’t afford to risk people’s lives by trying. At the end of the day, I have a job to do, and you’re a danger to the people around you no matter who they are.”

His head is clear when he gets up from the bench. The bag in his hand swings heavy; the snack cabinet at the dorms needs restocking. His

classmates might worry if he takes much longer.

“There are two ways I see this playing out,” he says to the man who used to be a child named Shimura Tenko, before All For One took him and twisted him into something new and vindictive and terrible. “I’m either going to take you down like any other villain, or I’m going to save you like any other victim. When I’m done, you won’t be a danger to anyone anymore." He smiles. "It’s really up to you to decide what that means.”

He feels light when he leaves. Relieved. When he looks back, the bench is empty and Shigaraki Tomura is gone.

It’s not fear that makes him run the rest of the way to UA. He simply doesn’t want to keep anyone waiting.

“It’s not that I’m not honored to be here for your rite of passage or whatever this is,” Tsuyu says. “I’m very glad to be in the fold. Really, I am.” She pauses, considering her next words. “But we *are* sneaking onto a school campus.”

“I have to agree,” Iida says weakly. He would probably put up more of a fuss, but he did attack a serial killer without a license once, so his position as a moral authority is a little weakened.

“I’m not worried,” Uraraka chips in helpfully.

“Ochako-chan, *why* \.”

“I dunno, but Todoroki’s my gauge,” she says. “He and Izuku are like, soulmates or whatever, so if he’s fine with Izuku doing this then so am I.”

The three of them turn to Shouto, who stares back at them blankly.

“I’m just thinking about how we might get in trouble if we’re caught,” Tsuyu says. “I know it’s a Sunday, but some faculty *do* work on weekends, you know.”

“Don’t worry,” Izuku assures them all from his position at the head of the pack. “If there’s one thing I remember about this place, it’s that they’ll let you get away with *anything* as long as you might become a hero in the future.” There’s a bite to his tone that makes little sense to anyone but Shouto.

And the ghosts, of course. The ghosts always know what’s going on, because there’s no keeping secrets from them.

“Still,” Iida says cautiously. “Midoriya, I know you said that you talked to your therapist about facing old fears in a new context, but I don’t see what that has to do with sneaking onto an elementary school campus.”

Izuku doesn’t respond, unless exchanging a meaningful look with Shouto counts as a response. (Hint: it doesn’t.)

He once walked these halls surrounded with people but all alone aside from Rei. Now he’s surrounded by friends, both living and dead. He even has heroes with him, for all that they’re dead. Of course, for what he’s about to do, being dead is an advantage for once.

Either way, he’s not alone. That’s sort of the point of this.

He still remembers it, even after nine years. It’s halfway between his old classroom and the cafeteria, along the quickest path that he always avoided. The old fear creeps in, because of course it does. But Shouto is letting him squeeze his hand, and Rei is squeezing his other. He’s surrounded by friends, and maybe—

Maybe, at this point, he can honestly say that he’s faced worse.

When they reach it, he stops. He looks at it, then left and right, taking in the hallway and its half-familiar walls. It’s been years, and it still matches his memory.

Even the sounds coming from behind the door are the same. And yet, they couldn't be more different. He remembers them being impossibly loud, full of vengeance and hatred and old, festering malice.

But now…

He’s heard worse. Far worse.

He’s even caused worse, to be perfectly honest.

“I don’t get it,” Tsuyu says cautiously. “It’s a janitor’s closet, isn’t it?”

“There’s something special about it, right?” Ochako asks. “What are we doing here?”

Izuku looks back to the others. A smile crosses his face when he sees them all still with him. He lets go of Shouto’s hand.

“Exorcising old ghosts,” he answers.

His hand trembles a little as it approaches the handle. He breathes, and it stills.

He opens the door.

Chapter End Notes

CW: mentioned dissociation, therapy.

And that's it. Thanks shingekicorn for the idea for the scene with Shizuo!

Thank you, everyone, for sticking with me all this time. See you in the next one!

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